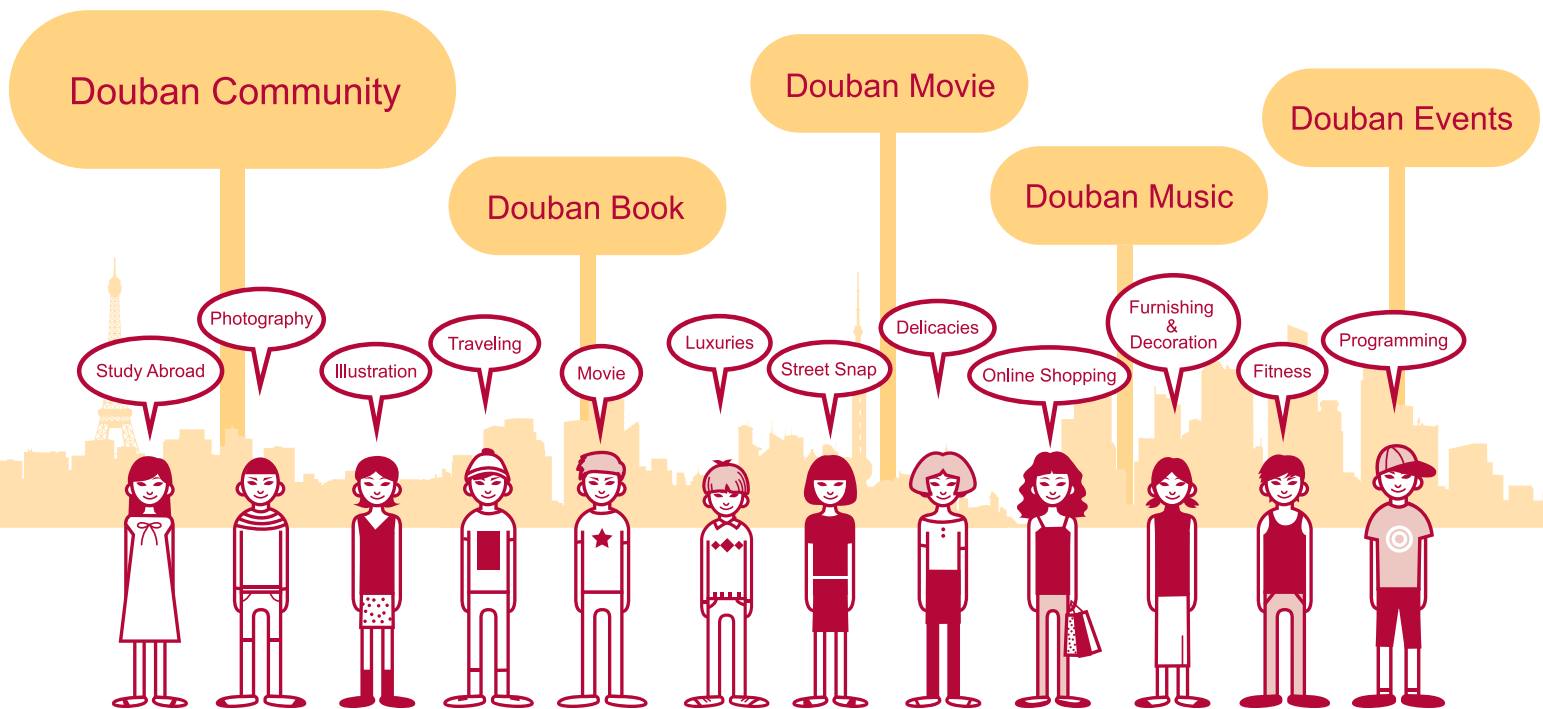


FOUND IN TRANSLATION

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS CAN HELP UK PUBLISHERS UNDERSTAND THEIR MARKET IN CHINA

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May 2015



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project on which this report is based has benefited from a warm collaboration between a number of individuals, to whom we are all very grateful: **Vicky Chen, Qin Dai, Evelyn Wang** and **Robert Zhao** from Douban; **Joanna Ellis** and **Sophie Rochester** at The Literary Platform; **Baoer Wan, David Elliott** and **Beatrice Pembroke** from the British Council and last, but not least, **David Mitchell**. We are also grateful to **Mark Llewellyn, Lucy Montgomery, Rick Rylance, Claire Spooner** and **Stian Westlake** for their comments on an earlier version of the report.

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TELLING STORIES USING SOCIAL DATA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The opening up and continued fast growth of the largest nation on earth has not passed by Britain's cultural industries. The statistics are now well rehearsed. China is producing 20 million new English speakers every year. Almost one quarter of students on full-time taught postgraduate courses at English universities are Chinese. Such trends point to very significant future expansions in the English-speaking market for British culture. The Internet, with its promise of low cost distribution channels for cultural producers, has added to the excitement. It is estimated that at the end of 2014 the number of internet users in China had reached 249 million people.

In book publishing - the focus of this report - 2012 saw China as the London Book Fair Market Focus, the culmination of a three-year programme of activity led in the UK by the British Council and the Publishers Association. In April 2014, China and the UK signed a film co-production treaty, with the BFI declaring that *"films made as China/UK co-productions will be able to access the second highest box office audience in the world, worth US\$2.7 billion and forecast to grow to US\$5.5 billion by 2017."* 2015 has seen a broadening of the China-UK cultural relationship, with the first ever China-UK Year of Cultural Exchange to *"showcase the very best of UK culture in China and of Chinese culture in the UK."*

Such developments reflect a broad perception that China's rise creates market opportunities on a massive scale for UK cultural producers that are quick to take advantage - a line of thinking that can be traced back to the old industrialists' dream that if one Chinese man wanted to lengthen his jacket by only an inch, cotton output from their mills would be boosted by millions.

In fact, there are stark differences between Chinese and Western book consumption habits which present considerable hurdles for UK publishers - the undeveloped nature of the e-book market, the popularity of online fiction (dominated by local talent), a seemingly low willingness to pay, attitudes to piracy and last, but not least, an immature understanding of Chinese readers' preferences. This is not to mention the more general costs of doing business in countries like China where governance and market institutions are often weak or missing. As a consequence of all these factors commercial uncertainties are considerable.

Where should UK publishers and writers be focusing their efforts?

In this paper, we explore how they can negotiate such uncertainties by using data from online social networks which the Chinese public has been particularly enthusiastic to embrace. Douban presents a unique opportunity in this regard. Being at the same time a social media platform, a publisher and a retailer, the platform permits rights holders to take a data-driven approach to engaging with readers, understand their wider cultural preferences and behaviours, and identify - and exploit - their influence in social networks. We examine these opportunities through the lens of an experiment with the novelist, David Mitchell that took the form of an online translation contest held in September 2013 and that we designed for the purposes of this study.

What did we learn?

First, that the online translation contest attracted over 200 entrants, of the same order of magnitude as previous Douban translation contests. Analysis of these entrants' wider cultural preferences – as captured by their likes on Douban – suggests that their motivations lay in language and translation, rather than in their loyalties to David Mitchell. So, although translators were more likely to have engaged with his work than Douban users with a general interest in British literature, the difference turns out to be slight. While there was clearer evidence that those who voted in the contest and those who purchased the winning translations were more familiar with Mitchell's writing, by no stretch of the imagination could these groups be characterised as fans (though the presence of some fans amongst the purchaser group will have been obscured by the relatively large number who responded to Douban's aggressive price discounting strategy). Moreover, there was little evidence that those who did engage with the contest – be it through submitting entries, voting or buying the winning translations – went on to engage more extensively with Mitchell's work as a result. Far more important in sparking interest in David Mitchell, it appears, was the Hollywood adaption of *Cloud Atlas*, including the English language six minute trailer. More work is required to understand such cross-media effects; but insofar as most writers will not enjoy such a boon, it is food for thought for those weighing up how much effort to invest in reader engagement.

Second, we learned that online translation contests can be effective and timely mechanisms for delivering high-quality Chinese translations of English fiction. An independent analysis of the entries suggested that as many as one in five of those submitted could, with relatively light editing and revision, have been made ready for publication. There is an open question as to how publishers can in these situations engage with those who produce high-quality translations but who did not win, to make sure their efforts are not wholly in vain.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we confirmed that social networks contain valuable insights into fan preferences and traits that publishers and writers can tap to better understand the Chinese market. In particular, while we found a number of British writers who had several popular works on Douban (David Mitchell included), it turns out that none – JK Rowling aside – had large numbers of the same fans liking their different titles (a very different situation from Chinese writers). Our analysis uncovered a smaller number of 'hard core' fans for these authors, however, which may point to the need for different engagement (and possibly commercial) strategies from publishers – ones where they deepen (and monetise) their relationship with these superfans. These fans, our analysis revealed, are far more engaged with British culture (books, films and music) than other Douban users and occupy more prominent positions in their social networks as measured by their number of followers. The experience of other cultural industries like video games suggests it is not inconceivable that even low numbers of such committed fans – if they can be identified – may be sufficient to allow publishers to be commercially successful, questions that merit further research.

Our findings hint at ways in which tastes for specific authors and their works may cluster, illustrating how analysis of social data can generate actionable insights that elude more top-down analysis. Yet they also underscore the extent to which interest in British authors as a

whole – at least on Douban – seems highly contingent. Interest rarely extends beyond top titles, though effects appear to be less stark for works such as sequels and adaptations whose discoverability and quality are ex ante less uncertain, building on accumulated consumption skills.

The superfans are the exception to this rule - being more dedicated as they are to multiple works by the same author. A potentially important implication is that UK publishers may need to focus their efforts on targeted, rather than mass engagement strategies which, our analysis at least, suggests will face deep challenges.

As a case study built around one experiment, involving David Mitchell and Douban, we are still scratching the surface of what UK publishers can learn from China's social networks. As the stakes of making calls about where and how much UK publishers should invest become ever higher, so leaning on data to minimise guesswork grows ever more attractive – and with it the promise of a more rigorous and realistic view of China's opportunities and challenges.

1. BACKGROUND: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

1.1 Emerging opportunity

By any measure, China's economic performance over the last three decades has been extraordinary. Two momentous transformations, from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one, and from a command economy to a market-based one have converged to raise the living standards of millions. Nowhere have the consequences been more noticeable than China's embrace of consumerism, telescoping what Western consumers took decades to achieve. The cultural industries – possibly the ultimate vehicle for consumer self-expression and inconceivable in China just over a generation ago, when Maoists denounced entertainment and aesthetics as a bourgeois indulgence – are today a visible part of the Chinese economy, and increasingly a priority for policymakers who look to them to move the country beyond the assembly line.

The consequences are important for the UK's cultural industries, which – like their competitors in Europe, the Americas and other parts of Asia – view China as a haven of opportunity. The success of *Downton Abbey* and its portrait of life on an Edwardian country estate, already a national craze in China, speaks loudly to this cultural and commercial imperative.¹ But while the growth prospects of the UK's film, music and publishing industries depend on meaningful engagement with emerging economies such as China, market uncertainties and cultural specificities pose significant challenges. Nobel Laureate Douglass North's enduring insight is that for markets to function effectively, institutions – formal as well as informal rules – must be in place, providing incentives for buyers and sellers to come together in an efficient manner.²

What many foreign businesses discover on arrival in emerging markets, however, is an environment quite unlike their own: scant market intelligence to facilitate decision-making; difficulties in reaching customers and suppliers in a timely manner; unreliable dispute resolution mechanisms; and regulatory frameworks that are frequently captured by local elites for their own benefit.³ Such features create considerable uncertainties for business, meaning that past opportunities are not necessarily a good guide to the future. At the macroeconomic level, projecting current trend growth rates of emerging markets such as China into even the near, much less distant, future can rest on slender foundations too.⁴

The implication for businesses that are lulled into a game of extrapolation is clear: all that glitters is not gold.

A more optimistic interpretation, however, is that thinking through these lacunae can force businesses to conceive new solutions to navigate them while creating strong first mover advantages over competitors.⁵ It has also been suggested that emerging market social networks could play an important role to this end. In many important instances, advantages hinge on individuals' or organisations' location in a network, especially the ability to bridge disparate parts of the network. This opportunity set has widened thanks to the growth of online social platforms: so far from being flashes in the pan, they are supporting interactions that, hitherto, have been too costly to undertake offline, generating a surplus for those involved.⁶

1.2 China's publishing industry in flux

Increasing commercial value is at stake. China's current publishing landscape is at once exciting and complex and is experiencing considerable disruption through its opening up to the world and the impact of technology that is altering the way in which readers consume and share content. China is now the second largest publishing market worldwide, accounting for over 12 per cent of global publishing. The International Publishers Association puts the value of the Chinese book market – print and digital – at €14.2 billion (£11.6 billion),⁷ making it a market that all foreign publishers are looking to better understand. Its strategic importance is expected to grow further, buoyed by domestic consumption and the aspiration of upward mobility among China's urban middle class.

The evolution of the publishing industry mirrors the general, if fitful liberalisation of the Chinese economy.⁸ There have been several aspects to this shift – from reforms to Chinese government policy on state publishing, ISBN distribution and copyright protection to deeper engagement with international organisations.⁹ Accelerated by entry into the WTO in 2001 and the 'Going out' drive in 2009, the policy framework has ceded a greater role to market signals. This process, resisted initially by publishing houses, was made mandatory in 2008 when the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP), the main media regulator, demanded that they convert to enterprises within three years. As a sign of the times, two provincial publishing groups – Liaoning Publishing Group and Jiangsu Phoenix Publishing – listed on the Shanghai stock exchange in 2007 and 2011, respectively.

The emergence of private publishers – many of which are better at gauging the market and more willing to take risks with rights purchases from overseas – is another consequence of the commercialisation of China's publishing industry. In theory, only state-run publishers are licensed to operate, though regulators have tacitly permitted the development of private players through the trading of ISBNs that restricts the number of books that can be published. Although there is a lack of up-to-date figures, there are estimated to be over 10,000 private publishers responsible for around half of the bestsellers in the market.¹⁰ Aware of the superior commercial judgement of private publishers, the government has encouraged state-run publishers to partner with them.¹¹ Areas of collaboration are no longer confined to the tacit ISBN trade: increasingly, state-run publishing groups are taking over strong private publishers or holding stakes in them. In turn, it is not implausible that foreign publishers will also become acquisition targets in a bid to take control of overseas distribution channels as Haier and Lenovo have done in IT and electronics.¹²

The creation of national champions is perhaps the most sophisticated expression of state capitalism in China.¹³ But it underlines the unstable relationship between market and state in the publishing industry, the unresolved boundaries of the 'birdcage economy'.¹⁴ Every publisher must be affiliated to a state agency – excessive segmentation that has limited the formation of dynamic cross-media and cross-regional publishing groups. GAPP issues an annual list of politically important topics, and publishers are compelled to devote a certain percentage of books – around 10 per cent – to them in their operating plans. Many sectors are off limits to the private sector – notably, textbook publishing that accounts for roughly 70 per cent of the total profit of the publishing industry. Digital content is watched less carefully – in part because of the difficulties in defining an e-book – though the retraction of Sina's online publication license in April 2014 showed that even it is not exempt from top-down control.

These efforts induce distortions and inefficiencies. One symptom is the build-up of inventories: on some estimates, it would take more than a year for the market to absorb unsold book stock even if another single title was not published.¹⁵ Another consequence is to exacerbate the uncertainties faced by businesses. The need to launch reforms in a centrally-planned, nominally socialist state; a bureaucracy in which different levels are not necessarily inferior or superior, shaped by myriad cross-allegiances and competing lines of authority; the personalised nature of power and influence in institutions; and the ambiguous and ever-changing nature of the reforms themselves – these features of China’s political economy, to some extent, have been a factor in shaping its strengths and innovative capacities, notably its flexibility and responsiveness. But they are also a recipe for short-term behaviour, encouraging risk avoidance and a focus on projects that mimic past winners to the detriment of worthy projects that may look nothing like them – for instance works by new or unfamiliar, foreign authors.¹⁶ Clearly though, conservatism of this nature exists in the cultural industries everywhere: indeed, it is part and parcel of blockbuster strategies that have stood the commercial test of time.¹⁷

But it takes on a heightened significance in the Chinese system due to the specificities of an economy in transition and the relatively low commitment of the private sector to R&D and other investments in innovation.¹⁸ An example of this orientation, perhaps, is the fixation with the next Big Book – what jokingly has been called an ‘acute case of the Franzens’.¹⁹ Inspired by Mo Yan’s Nobel win, advances running into the millions are being given to sprawling, competitive tomes that attempt to examine the struggles of contemporary China. Their proliferation has become increasingly opportunistic and myopic leaving readers lost in a deluge of interchangeable realist voices and aspiring writers with narrowed possibilities for story and character development.²⁰

1.3 What the consumer wants

China, like other countries before it, is discovering that there is seemingly no limit to the growth of a consumerist society. The spread of markets brings with it a large and intricately branching set of desires that in turn spur new ones. Karl Gerth, in his history of the Chinese consumer, observes how the hard-headed desire for Taiwanese investment dollars, technology and expertise in the late 1980s resulted in the unintended creation of a fried dough sticks and bubble tea market. As waves of Taiwanese businessmen came to the mainland to take advantage of lower wages and cheaper land, so they brought their lifestyles with them. Ventures sprang up to provide a home away from home, though entrepreneurs quickly spied an opportunity to extend offerings to the wider Chinese market – for instance, to take popular Taiwanese products such as deep-fried dough sticks out of dirty street stalls and sell them in more refined, friendlier surroundings, a dynamic that has played out for everything from Karaoke bars to bookstores stocked with international bestsellers: *“Suddenly the issue isn’t if you drink coffee, but what brand and where”*.²¹

Rapid growth has whetted the appetite for new consumer lifestyles, though not necessarily the means for satisfying them. Imbalances in China’s development model have systematically favoured fixed investment over household consumption that potentially limit the size of the new middle class that Western businesses are wagering will drive future growth.²² Inequality remains stubbornly high in incomes, consumption, and asset ownership across and within

regions and social groups – one reason why in per capita terms China is still some way off the ‘sweet spot’ or income level at which demand for cultural goods and services tends to be most intense.²³

Foreign brands have acquired a special allure among early adopters, though this banal truth can miss a larger reality. Not all brands are created equal, and many require adaptation to cater to local values, tastes and traditions.²⁴ Brands that can be leveraged as tools for advancement, and consumed for status as much as enjoyment have a particular foothold – one reason why content with ‘heritage’ appeal such as *Downton Abbey* and *Sherlock Holmes* has performed so well. The trade-off is that markets can resemble an unruly bazaar in which genuine identifiers, beyond broad stereotypes, remain few and far between, resulting in weak brand loyalty and fickle consumer behaviour.

The notion of local traditions is linked to the role of culture and the extent to which it independently shapes behaviour, sways choices and influences decisions. A number of observers draw attention to the neurosis at the heart of Chinese contemporary consumerism, the tension between bold status projection and nervous protection of hard-won, easily lost material gains, underpinned by the strong institutionalisation of the family, a long-standing theme that reverberates through classic works such as Lin Yutang’s *My Country and My People*.²⁵ The popularity of genres as diverse as popular science, wealth management, self-help, education, fantasy as well as certain types of foreign literature can all be viewed as reflections of, and responses to this cultural blueprint.²⁶

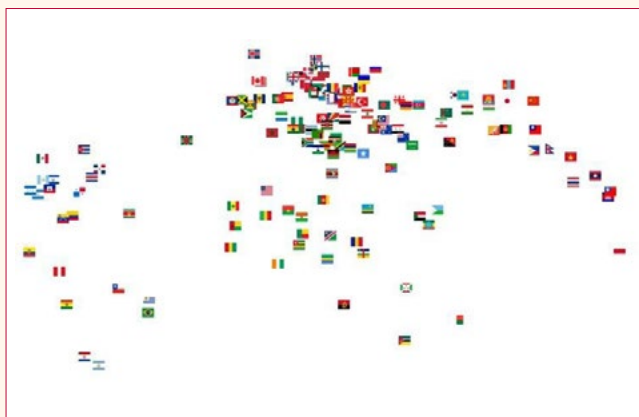
The appeal of certain cultural products can, of course, derive from their difference as much as their similarity with home cultures – think hip hop in Asia, even as its more abrasive edges are smoothed by love stories and regionally resonant remonstrations against the hardships of the education system.²⁷ Culture may also provide a context in which certain media forms can flourish in distinctive ways: for example, Japanese manga artists who enjoyed greater freedom to develop works that appealed to teenagers and adults than did their peers in the US where episodic outcries about extreme content triggered closer regulatory scrutiny.²⁸

That preferences may be constrained by local contexts is further suggested by the large literature on home bias in the cultural industries. A prominent study exploring this issue is Ferreira and Waldfogel.²⁹ They examine trade in popular music, analysing official charts data for 22 countries since 1960. They find that the ‘domestic share’ of music consumption is high and has, if anything, increased since 1990, despite advances in communication technologies that have increased the availability of cultural goods across borders.

This finding appears to challenge the view that local differences are melting away under the force of globalisation. A limitation of the study, however, is that the data end in 2007 – one year before Spotify was officially launched, for instance, and the last year that Wal-Mart still sold more music than Apple. In other words, it captures trade in music at the end of an era, one different from our own in fundamental respects. Intuitively, it is likely that the domestic share of music consumed online – where it should be easier to access foreign music – is much lower than when music was played on CDs.³⁰ However, a study examining listening behaviour from the social media website last.fm finds that although many of the most popular artists transcend constraints, preferences remain to a good extent anchored to geography and language.³¹ While it is unclear whether this is a full-blown cultural phenomenon or specific to this particular platform, it is not unreasonable to assume that barriers are higher in the case of books, where language has a disproportionate influence on what can and cannot be accessed in the absence of high-quality translation.³²

Box 1: CAGE Distance Analysis for the UK (Economy-wide)

The CAGE framework is based on the gravity trade model developed by Ghemawat and Mallick (2003). Building on the observation that trade is not frictionless but falls away with distance, it incorporates cultural, administrative, geographic and economic factors to identify and rank countries according to their similarity and difference with home countries. Estimates derived from this measure and elements of it have been found to do a good job of explaining bilateral trade patterns and other significant cross-border flows.



Calculations based on the CAGE Comparator

A country-level perspective is not without weaknesses: specifically, average distances can miss important internal differences regards market sophistication, purchasing power, technological readiness, language and human development, with some regions more or less integrated than others.

Nonetheless, findings are instructive, with implications for investment priorities and portfolio choices. Analysis of UK's pairwise relationships indicates that China is 134th furthest from the UK, behind other prominent emerging economies such as India (43rd), though ordinal rankings can misstate the degrees of difference or distance involved (see the map above). Once adjusted for distance, commercial opportunities in China remain considerable thanks to its market size and growth rate, albeit more limited than raw figures imply. From the UK's perspective, it is closer to being the world's tenth largest economy rather than second largest economy in nominal terms.

Ghemawat, P. and Mallick R. (2003) 'The Industry-Level Structure of International Trade Networks: A Gravity-Based Approach' Harvard Business School Working Paper.

Of course, there is no obvious reason to prioritise 'culture' which, taken to an extreme, can give the impression that it has arrived pristine from some zero point in time, impervious to economic and demographic change and the roiling interaction of different attachments and affiliations.³³ The importance of the internet and private forms of consumption in China lies precisely in the cloak of anonymity that they provide individuals to explore different identities, including novel forms of activism.³⁴

In reality, education, politics, occupational status, gender and residence have some, often extensive influence on consumption decisions. Bearing out this point, it is found that class distinctions in China, as measured by possession of authority, skill or property, significantly differentiate reading habits and tastes.³⁵ Those in managerial and professional occupations not only read highbrow books more frequently but also read more widely across genres. By contrast, self-employed individuals possess the least amount of cultural capital, reading less overall than production and service workers. Interestingly, private business owners, while possessing more economic resources than other groups, are found to resemble working classes much more than elite classes in preferences. One possibility is that, like the self-employed, this group has less time to invest in cultural capital and that the cost of this capital is high, based on the not unreasonable assumption that the demand for culture is influenced by past consumption, whatever the precise mechanism: learning-by-consuming, rational addiction or habit formation.³⁶

1.4 The role of intellectual property

The injunction to 'know one's audience' is underlined by the considerable risks of doing business in emerging economies. China is the single largest source economy for counterfeit and pirated products in the world, with these activities estimated to account for some 8 per cent of Chinese GDP.³⁷ Piracy rates are so high that China's total recorded music revenue in 2011 lagged that of Thailand, itself no intellectual property angel with a vastly smaller population.³⁸

With modernisation of China's copyright law in 1990, 2001 and 2006, measures have been taken to bring the intellectual property regime in line with international norms and expectations. In 2011, after numerous false dawns, Baidu, China's most popular search engine, settled out of court with the four major record labels, agreeing to phase out its MP3 search function in favour of a new, licensed service. A similar agreement was executed with Sogou in 2013. The significance of these victories can be overstated – deals cover only major artists and fees are believed too small to move the dial for the industry, leading one commentator to describe them as a *"reluctant interim concession from desperate rights owners"*.³⁹ Still, given China's relatively low starting point, they represent a continuing advance towards better copyright protection.

Piracy's underlying causes defy simple diagnosis. William Alford's seminal *To Steal a Book Is an Elegant Offence*, for instance, argues that copyright law in China can be traced back to the appearance of printing in China during the Tang dynasty (618–906 AD); however, its main purpose was to keep heterodox ideas from the people, not to protect the economic rights of authors. The attitude of the Chinese intelligentsia towards the copying of their works was rather one of tolerance since dissemination supported traditional norms of morality and with it, tighter central control.⁴⁰

The implication – one consistent with the legal origins literature⁴¹ – is that China's institutional soil is more hostile to transplanted laws; though, as with any practices that have persisted for a long time, China's past is sufficiently rich to be made compatible with different environmental demands. Confucian ontology may have required humans to seek guidance from the universe, but it did not insist on slavish obedience. Rather, it viewed the universe as a source of inspiration from which humans actively discover new meanings. China also had in place many of the building blocks of technology markets: by contrast, it is often forgotten that the development of intellectual property in the West owed less to its freedoms than to its constraints – in particular, powerful trade monopolies and guilds. The family-based secrecy model, for instance, offered an effective mechanism for exploiting ideas, aligned as it was with sectors such as pre-industrial handcrafts where technological advances were incremental and intergenerational in character – and, in many ways, anticipating the trade secrecy that companies routinely adopt in advanced developed countries.^{42, 43}

Institutions cannot be procured off the shelf or built according to a set of instructions. Their ultimate traction depends on their efficacy, accessibility of the mechanisms for enforcement and perceived fairness. With respect to file-sharing, Adrian Johns makes the point that home piracy has always been something of an oxymoron given the tendency to associate domesticity with propriety and autonomy, a *"subtle, unostentatious practice that left few traces and allowed for a certain creative freedom on the part of the (user)"*.⁴⁴ Among

emerging markets' consumers this is linked to a conviction that the rules of global trade are made by and for the benefit of rich Western multinationals.⁴⁵ In other words, attitudes to piracy are not an empty vessel, waiting to be filled by education and rising incomes but are often fully formed, bordering on a distinct moral economy.

Incentives matter. Notably, the conflict between national and local interests means that provinces have a greater interest in churning out fakes than the central government has in conceding to international pressure to clamp down on them.⁴⁶ These payoffs have become more asymmetric over time as cuts in subsidies and changes in revenue-sharing arrangements have forced cash-strapped provincial governments to find new ways to maintain themselves, local employment and public goods.⁴⁷ To compound matters, administrative agencies are weak and under-resourced: one reason why bureaucratic redundancy – the growth of parallel institutions may have contributed, however inelegantly, to more robust protection as agencies compete to secure a greater share of the enforcement market and its spoils.⁴⁸

Which parties have skin in the game also determines the diverging fortunes of the digital sector. The video space has flourished thanks partly to pressure from major international brands that, as significant advertisers on video sites, have grown alarmed by their association with pirated material, a message dramatised in 2009 when Coca Cola and Pepsi were sued for contributory copyright infringement as part of legal action taken against Youku (now Youku Tudou), China's largest video streaming service.⁴⁹

The result – an increase in demand for licensed content and resulting one-hundred-and-eighty-fold increase in fees for popular Chinese television series between 2009 and 2011 – contrasts markedly with the woes of the music industry. There, fear of collateral damage has arguably been a less powerful incentive for advertisers to monitor behaviour since the costs of them being associated with an infringing search engine – as opposed to a specific piece of content as in the case of video – are more diffuse and widely borne. As a consequence, many rights holders have felt that they have little alternative but to find more defensive revenue streams, such as color ringback tones (CRBTs), taking what they can get from arrangements that are heavily lopsided in favour of wireless service providers and other intermediaries.⁵⁰

This is not to reduce all cultural production to economic incentives; nor is it to enter the charged debate about the net impact of piracy; but rather to recognise that IP creates a direct mechanism for policy intervention in cultural industries. But does it go far enough? The open question is whether the IP regime, even under conditions of perfect enforcement – is capable of meeting the weight of expectation placed on its shoulders by Chinese policymakers and foreign businesses.

This statement may appear odd at first sight since it is often assumed that clarifying property rights will free digital markets to work their magic. The long tail principle of unlimited shelf space denotes that if a product can be imagined, it can be sold anytime and anywhere to the mutual benefit of buyers and sellers of content. China has already taken over the US as the largest e-commerce market for goods and services, and its e-commerce share of total retail is now higher than that of the US, notwithstanding its lower internet penetration. In September 2014, e-commerce giant, Alibaba raised \$25 billion through its IPO in the US, making it the biggest US IPO in history.⁵¹ Amazon China alone boasts over 6.8 million English language titles in its online bookstore, a figure that is only likely to increase as more content becomes available, matching already impressive developments in hardware.⁵²

The statement becomes clearer, however, once it is understood that cost, not IP, considerations have driven this shift: roughly half of online shoppers choose to buy online for pricing reasons, reflecting inefficiencies along traditional supply chains that are still dominated by intermediaries. It is estimated that modern, organised retailers now account for less than 40 per cent of total retail, and even they carry out most of their business with middlemen rather than with manufacturers and brands directly.⁵³

1.5 Foreign publishers: winners or losers?

This has ambiguous implications for Western publishers and writers. On the one hand, Chinese readers can redeploy the cost savings to purchasing more books, enabling them to experiment with less mainstream – including foreign – titles in a cheaper, low-risk way. On the other hand, as e-books capture greater share from physical books, Western publishers could find themselves in an unforgiving race to the bottom. The experience of Jingdong, a leading Chinese online retailer that has been at the forefront of efforts to build out e-book capabilities, is symptomatic. Its annual bestseller list shows that top British novels such as *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* and a *Sherlock Holmes* anthology – ranked 7th and 17th place respectively in 2014 – sell for little as 0.99 yuan (10p).⁵⁴

These exuberances may be passing phenomena, a reflection of the early stages of market entry when suppliers compete ruthlessly to build market share while undercutting the economics of piracy. A different perspective, however, is offered by behavioural experiments on anchoring effects.⁵⁵ As individuals have trouble determining what they are willing to pay for different products, initial price expectations can have a long-term effect on those determinations. Akin to goslings that hatch from their eggs and imprint on the first moving object they encounter, decisions can be extremely sticky once they are made. If we push this insight to its logical conclusion, it suggests that price wars between online retailers, aggressive discounting, fear of piracy, low incomes and the inexpensiveness of physical substitutes may have trained consumers that the ‘fair’ price for digital content is very low.⁵⁶

Already, some prominent retailers have decided the endgame is bleak and are attempting to pre-empt this fate through diversification. Dang Dang, for instance, sees its future increasingly in the higher margin apparel and accessories segment.⁵⁷ Whatever the broader context for these challenges, one thing is clear: efforts to raise prices, whether incrementally or in line with conventions in high-income markets, will likely meet resistance unless publishers can simultaneously change the context in which value is determined – in the process differentiating content from what appeared before.

1.6 The opportunity of digital

As once rigid dividing walls between creators and traditional gatekeepers to cultural markets crumble as a result of digitisation, writers accustomed to the patronage and pageantry of the old order are finding themselves squeezed by new voices.⁵⁸ This is especially true in China, where the internet has emerged as a quasi-public space.⁵⁹ With its millions of self-organised communities and redundant connections, putting the genie back in the bottle has proven difficult. Relations between authorities and internet users remain characterised by a fitful *détente* rather than genuine openness, though it has not precluded the need for greater compromise and negotiation as part of this equation.

The impact on writing has been no less significant.⁶⁰ Jo Lusby, managing director of Penguin China, observes that *“there are no authors under the age of 35 who were not discovered on the internet”*. With over 590 million internet users, cutting across all socioeconomic and demographic groups, online literature sites are now a lucrative business.⁶¹ Cloudary, that made headlines when it withdrew its plans to go public in the US in 2013, is one of the largest players, with more than six million user-generated titles in its database following the incorporation of popular websites Qidian and Hongxiu. Its fortunes have been on the wane after much of its middle management team defected to launch a rival startup that was acquired by Tencent, China’s largest internet service portal. The recently announced merger of Cloudary and Tencent Literature in effect consummates this relationship and continues the online publishing industry’s trend towards consolidation.

1.7 The art of publishing

Much of this effort has resulted in light-hearted escapism – genres such as urban, time-travel, romance, fantasy and kung fu dominate charts and recommendation lists, though as Guobin Yang points out, to dismiss the output as ‘pulp’ or ‘disposable’ is to miss some of its deeper cultural significance, especially in its multiple utopian allusions.⁶² It is written, downloaded, read and deleted all at breakneck speed, a practice that has been facilitated by the unusual readiness of Chinese consumers to read works on mobile phones. This has benefited competitors with capabilities in relevant technology, notably China Mobile whose mobile reading division – Mobile Reading Base – now operates in Hangzhou and Zhejiang, having invested nearly \$75 million (£45 million) in mobile reading infrastructure and micropayment systems.⁶³

To satisfy this appetite, internet writers are obliged to write works of often several million words within months – largely without professional editing. Quality is often the casualty, though works such as *Ghost Blows Out the Light* have occasionally piqued the curiosity of traditional publishers. Paradoxically, online literature may have flourished because of these concerns, not despite them. Many releases take the form of serials (as opposed to one-off e-books) – an echo of Victorian literature – allowing writers to get immediate feedback and adjust their stories as they go along, making readers firm companions in the creative journey, regardless of the implications for quality.⁶⁴

As a volume business, this model sits uncomfortably with the craftsmanship and the capacity for contemplation afforded by traditional professional writing.⁶⁵ Further research is necessary to understand in what senses online literature is a substitute for or complement to more serious works, though the sheer time and energy devoted to it hint at the opportunity cost. Publishers therefore need to weigh the extent to which they go head-to-head with online writers or focus on more sheltered areas such as non-fiction in which professional writers enjoy a continuing comparative advantage.⁶⁶ They also need to determine the extent to which they cling to the goal of chasing the largest possible audience or more radically seek out niches, or price discrimination strategies, crafting products for which the most ardent fans are willing to pay significant sums.

Of more general interest, such choices reflect different views about whether consumption will stay at the head of the demand curve or is shifting to the tail. The evidence is that though offerings are becoming more varied in digital markets, the importance of titles at the very top has grown over time while average sales of the lowest sellers have shrunk: the tail may be getting longer, but it is unmistakably thin.⁶⁷

Does this mean that niche strategies, including foreign literature are unviable? Trends look less unfavourable when we consider the behaviour of individual consumers. Research has found that the audience for more niche products is often composed of relatively heavy consumers, those who buy that product more often. In other words, a nontrivial amount of revenue can be generated from only a minority of high-paying, dedicated customers: across successful crowdsourcing projects, for instance, it is not unusual for half of revenues to come from around a fifth of the audience.⁶⁸

A more promising approach, perhaps, is to add layers of value to content so that consumers can spend differing amounts in line with their interest. A prime example is the video games industry where games are released as free titles in order to build an audience and obtain visibility; but the most hardcore gamers have the option to deepen their gaming experience by buying extra lives, unlocks and maps at escalating price points. What is yet unclear is whether this model can be applied to publishing, not least because the notion of creating 'brands' around writers capable of generating multiple revenue streams is – outside a very small number of exceptions – still a nascent phenomenon, not restricted to China.

2. SOCIAL NETWORKS: A RESOURCE FOR UK PUBLISHERS?

Social media platforms may conceivably be an important resource to help foreign publishers negotiate the uncertainties discussed above.⁶⁹ The rise of e-books already gives them – or at least retailers – insights into readers’ preferences: what other books have they purchased in the past? How much do they spend? And what else do they go on to read? They are also beginning to mine social media for sentiment and content clickstream data.⁷⁰ These data can be linked at high frequency to data on variables like sales, publicity and events, providing valuable insights into commercial drivers.⁷¹ A platform like China’s Douban is particularly interesting in this regard, as it is retailer-publisher and social network at the same time, allowing it to seamlessly view users’ transactions, their positions in their network, infer their wider preferences for related content like movies and music, and even understand their motivations for purchasing content when they post reviews. But it also gives publishers myriad ways to directly engage with users, draw on their collective intelligence and nurture fan communities for their writers.

To explore such issues *in situ*, we collaborated with the British novelist, David Mitchell, and Douban, on an experiment.⁷² Specifically, we ran an online contest held between August and September 2013 where the Chinese public was invited to submit translations of two of Mitchell’s short stories, *The Gardener* and *The Massive Rat*. The prize was that the winning translations were designed and made available for sale on the Douban Read e-book platform, with the translator benefiting from a revenue sharing agreement with Mitchell and the platform. We collected data which allowed us to analyse which features of the experiment were most effective in engaging users, to assess how successful was the contest in crowdsourcing translations, and to derive from the Douban platform more generally insights of value to David Mitchell and other British writers.⁷³

2.1 Social Networks as a Tool for Engagement I

With the glut of information in a digital world comes a new scarcity: attention. It is not a coincidence that most of the content that individuals encounter online is pushed at them.⁷⁴ Yet getting content seen or heard is fundamentally a social process in which information rises, falls and spreads with not only individual but also collective behaviour.⁷⁵ Cultural content such as books have features – highly experiential and impulse-driven – that lend themselves to such dynamics.⁷⁶ This appears especially true in China where audiences attach more weight to peer recommendations when making purchasing decisions than they do to professional criticism – much of which is thinly disguised advertising, not a credible guide to quality, reinforcing the lack of trust that individuals have for the formal institutions around them.⁷⁷ In addition, social media sites play a much greater role in the lives of ordinary Chinese: on average, netizens spend 46 minutes a day visiting social media sites such as QQ, Weibo, WeChat and RenRen, compared with only seven minutes a day from Japan, and 37 minutes a day from the US, for example⁷⁸ – a trend that is evident in the rapid growth of social commerce.⁷⁹

Why some things catch on in the form of information cascades or social epidemics has been of some interest to researchers. The literature has identified a variety of possible mechanisms that drive word of mouth effects, even if the ability to manage the process appears to be more of an art than a science.⁸⁰

Social Currency: People care intensely about how they are perceived by others. Sharing stories or messages that are remarkable, and that buck a trend people have come to take for granted can create a good impression. Leveraging game mechanics that are fun and compelling can have a similar effect: frequent flier programmes, for instance, allow people to publicise their achievements and compete against others, thereby spreading awareness of the airline. Another mechanism is scarcity and exclusivity: the simple fact that something is not widely available can make people feel like insiders and spread the word to parade this status.

Triggers: It is axiomatic that stimuli in the wider environment can affect which ideas are at the top of individuals' minds. Most products have natural triggers, though it is possible to create new links and links can be oblique: consider NASA's Pathfinder Mission that led to a sudden spike in the sales of Mars bars, for example. The effectiveness of any trigger depends on how frequently it occurs and how strongly it is related to the product. Even negative triggers can increase buzz if it reminds people of a product's existence. A study of *New York Times* book reviews found that bad reviews for books by new or relatively unknown authors boosted sales by 45 per cent.⁸¹

Emotion: The more emotional the content, the more likely it will be shared, though this finding has interesting wrinkles. Analysis of Most Emailed lists finds that articles that evoke excitement increase sharing while sadder articles decrease it.⁸² This has less to do with whether an article is positive or negative than whether content is sufficiently arousing – hence why articles that provoke anger or anxiety are more widely shared than low-arousal ones. Content need not be arousing in itself to be shared as long as it piggybacks off activities that are.

Public: Imitation is a powerful force insofar as others' choices are understood to contain valuable information. Herding is pervasive in all walks of life, though it varies with the extent to which displays can be made visible. One study found that the effects of social influence on car purchases were strongest in cities such as Los Angeles where commuting is the norm or in sunnier cities such as Miami that make it easier to see what cars others are driving.⁸³ This can militate against abstract causes or products that are consumed privately, though they too can be made public with appropriate design – for instance, by making headphones white (e.g. iPods) or growing moustaches in November (e.g. prostate cancer awareness). This scope is expanding in a digital environment where online activity – reviews, blogs, posts, clicks – is leaving a trail of behavioural residue.⁸⁴

Practical Value: Useful content is also more likely to be shared. This frequently has a pecuniary motivation – such as sharing promotional offers. Attention is paid increasingly to how such deals are expressed: percentage discounts tend to be more salient for small-ticket items while absolute discounts matter more for expensive ones.⁸⁵ Packaging knowledge and expertise into digestible morsels so that people can learn quickly also facilitates transmission. A trade-off exists between broad content that may reach more people overall but makes it difficult to call to mind actual recipients who would benefit from it.

Stories: Human beings are story-telling animals.⁸⁶ Information travels more effortlessly and is easier to recollect when expressed as a narrative with a vivid beginning, middle and end. Stories provide proof by analogy that are harder to falsify while capacious enough to accommodate many of the principles discussed above that ensure things go viral.

All of these insights resonate with particular force for cultural producers operating in foreign markets that can face significant awareness problems without deep pockets for marketing and advertising. With Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other major platforms officially blocked in China, heroically assuming that social media waves created at home will spill onto Chinese shores is a questionable assumption. Attempts have been made by intermediaries such as the British Council to help bridge these divides – for instance, by helping British writers such as David Mitchell, Jeanette Winterson and Joe Dunthorne build social media profiles on Weibo. However, arguably such initiatives have fallen short of the commitment and spontaneity required to take advantage of new forms of book production and consumption, empowered by network effects.

This is not to say that artists have been slow to appreciate the opportunities that social media presents. A good example is David Mitchell's recent publication of *The Right Sort* on Twitter: a short-story narrated wholly in the present tense by a boy hallucinating on Valium pills. Twitter is a useful, organic vehicle for the story to the extent that it mirrors the effects of Valium, rendering the 'bruising hurly-burly of the world into orderly, bite-sized pulses'. Moreover, the challenge of writing fiction for Twitter – Mitchell compared the constraints of the form to a 'diabolical treble-strapped textual straitjacket' – is remarkable in its own right and so more likely to be discussed and shared.⁸⁷

Yet, David Mitchell's use is also a microcosm for many of the limits of digital technology as it is usually used in culture, in that it conforms to the cherished idea of the artist as independent creator, working separately from his or her audience, even though this relationship is of only recent historical provenance.⁸⁸ By contrast, the potential of technology to enable more intimate connection with audiences, insofar as it poses a dilemma for this conception of creativity, is less developed.⁸⁹

Presence on social media, even when it resists Twitter-friendly lip service, is therefore not an engagement panacea. This was our experience in the translation contest too.

For example, we investigated whether the contest and any other events leading up to it were associated with an increase in 'likes' for David Mitchell's work on the Douban Read platform. Specifically, we tracked when Douban users, if at all, added a particular David Mitchell book to their profile page, indicating they had read, were reading or wanted to read it (which for shorthand we characterise as a 'like'). This was carried out separately for a random sample of 1,500 readers who had previously indicated a 'like' for Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*, and all 702 contest participants – those submitting translations ('translators') (219), the voters (184) and those who went on to purchase the winning translations on Douban Read in the period from 1 December 2013 when they went on sale in the form of a single e-book, through to June 30 2014, our data cut-off (299).⁹⁰

This measure is not without its weaknesses: proxying interest by whether users had read, were reading or wanted to read a work excludes numerous other online ways in which such interest might be expressed, such as through page views, though these would arguably be less revealing; it makes no use of the qualitative insight which can be gleaned from book reviews, though these would be subject to self-selection biases; it relies on users' reported – not actual – behaviour, ignoring incentives to misrepresent preferences, for example; and the timing of book additions alone does not necessarily reveal anything about causation.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the results (See Figures 1a and 1b) pointed to the limited role overall of the contest in engaging Douban users.

Figure 1a: Cumulative David Mitchell books added, random sample of 1,500 Douban users who had previously registered a 'like' for *Cloud Atlas* novel

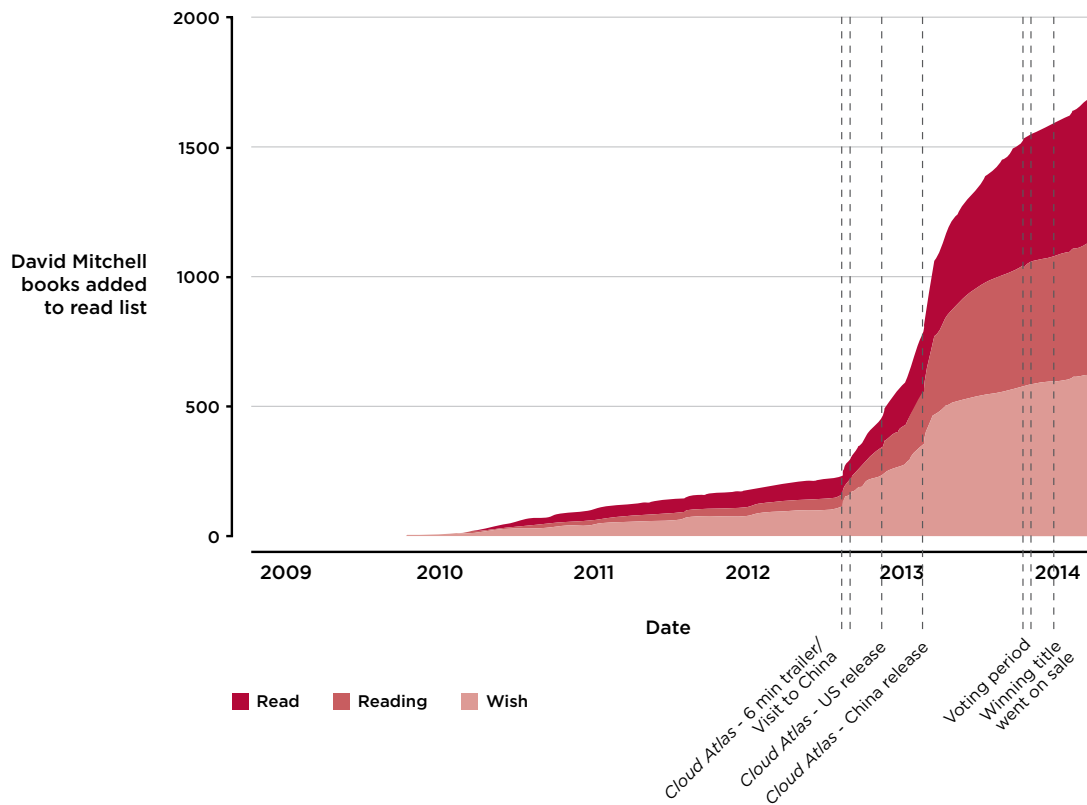
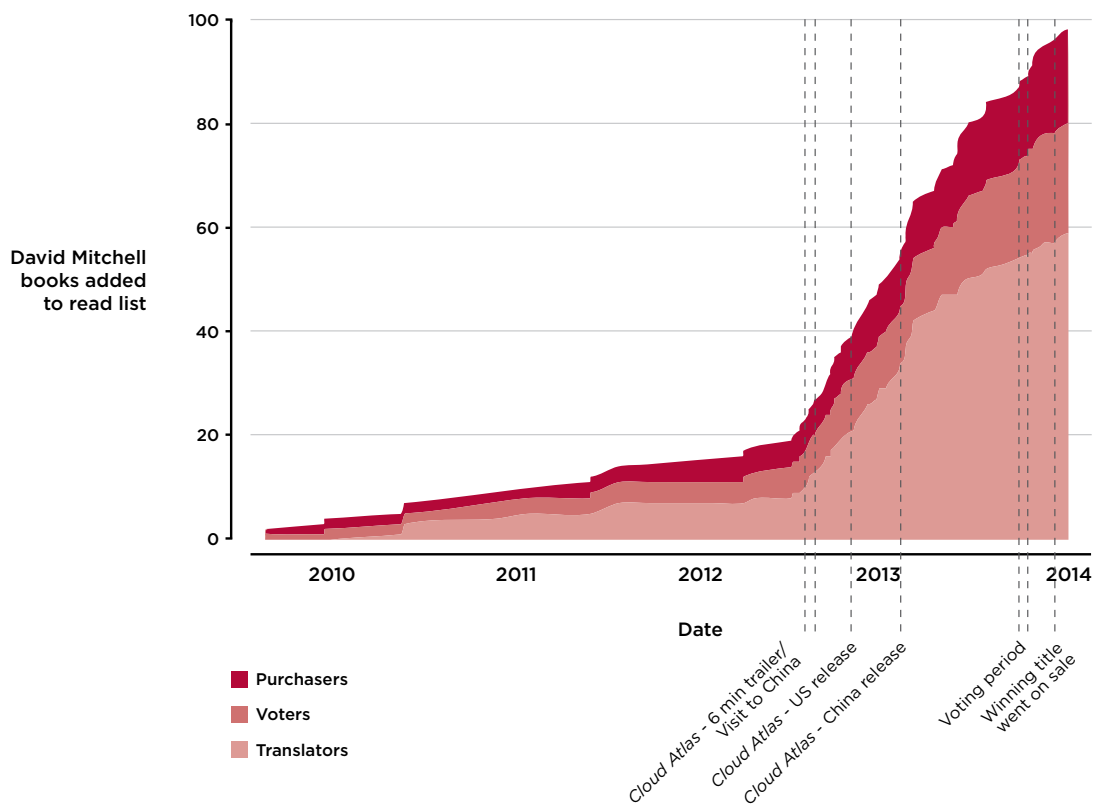


Figure 1b: Cumulative David Mitchell books added, contest participants



We can reflect on the possible reasons for this. For the translators, the most obvious factor is the steep entry barrier imposed by the language requirements of the exercise. Consistent with this, two translation contests run previously by Douban Read (the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho in 2012 and the French novelist, Marie Nimier in 2013) elicited a similar order of magnitude of entries (327 and 117 respectively). Compounding this, as discussed later, an independent literary translation analysis of 33 entries for the David Mitchell contest undertaken as part of our study, revealed a number of cultural specificities in the two short stories that challenged even the strongest of the translators.⁹¹ With these considerations in mind, arguably the fact that 219 complete submissions were received should be seen as evidence that the contest engaged a community of Douban users with ambition, and, as the literary translation analyst concluded, in many cases strong, translation capabilities.

For potential voters on Douban, however, as the contest only built in limited opportunities for David Mitchell's personal involvement, we can speculate that the contest was viewed as a 'technical' exercise, aimed principally at those with an interest in English–Chinese translation per se rather than at fans of the author, or British writing, per se,⁹² helping to account for the relatively low numbers of votes.

This is not to say that those participating in the contest were not also more likely to be familiar with David Mitchell's work. On average, they had more David Mitchell books on their 'like' list (excluding *The Gardener* and *The Massive Rat*) than all the benchmark groups we analysed. Their film and music likes also suggested that they were more engaged than other groups with British culture more generally. Moreover, they had much larger numbers of

followers than the other groups, raising the prospect that they occupied a more prominent place – and therefore position of influence – in Douban’s social network (though the numbers across all these groups are too small to draw substantive conclusions). These findings are presented in Table 1. Along most dimensions, the differences are statistically significant, despite the fact that in some cases the distributions within groups manifest extreme skew.

Table 1: Cultural preferences of translation contest participants and other groups⁹³

	<i>Translators^a</i>	<i>Voters^b</i>	<i>Purchasers^c</i>	<i>Random. anglo^d</i>	<i>Random.bc^e</i>	<i>Random book^f</i>	<i>Coelho translators^g</i>
Number	219	184	299	500	500	500	327
Timespan, days^h	805*	826**	1280***	689	795**	85***	928***
No. of followers, mean	85*	465***	354**	33	98***	3***	1048***
No. of following, mean	69***	112***	129***	35	73***	5***	66***
No. of titles read, mean	83**	113***	164***	51	56	2***	94***
O/w Foreign Lit (外国文学), meanⁱ	20***	41***	37***	11	11	0***	24***
O/w Britain/England (英国), mean^j	6**	11***	12***	4	4	0***	7***
No. of David Mitchell titles read, mean^k	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Proportion who had seen <i>Cloud Atlas</i> movie^l	0.3***	0.2***	0.4***	0.1	0.1+	0.0***	0.2***
No. of Britain/England (英国) movies and TV shows seen, mean^m	33***	43***	48***	13	25***	2***	25***
No. of Britain/England (英国) albums heard, meanⁿ	9	28**	30***	7	13+	1***	10

a. These are those individuals who submitted complete translations for the David Mitchell translation contest. A further 247 individuals submitted incomplete translations; these are not considered here.

b. These are those individuals who registered a vote for one of the three shortlisted David Mitchell translations according to the contest rules.

c. These are those individuals who purchased a copy of the e-book of the winning David Mitchell translations on the Douban Read platform before the 30 June data cut off for this study.

d. This is a random sample of 500 Douban users who have marked that they have Read, are Reading or Wish to Read at least one book from the list

of 200 books that have most frequently tagged 英国 (Britain/England) by Douban users. This list includes non-fiction as well as fiction writers, like Alain de Botton, Jeanette Winterson, Agatha Christie, George Orwell, Douglas Adams, Charles Dickens, Somerset Maugham, Ian McEwan and JK Rowling.

e. This is a random sample of 500 Douban users who follow the British Council site on Douban: <http://site.douban.com/britishcouncil/followers/>.

f. This is a random sample of 500 Douban users who have marked that they have Read, are Reading or Wish to Read at least one book.

g. These are those individuals who submitted complete translations for the Paolo Coelho

translation contest. A further 240 individuals submitted incomplete translations; these are not considered here.

h. ‘Timespan’ refers to the number of days that had elapsed between the user first and last updating something on their Douban account, as of the time the data set was constructed.

i. These are titles with the foreign literature (外国文学) tag.

j. These are titles with the Britain/England (英国) tag.

k. This refers to distinct titles (that is, a user who says they have read two editions of the same title are treated as having read one title).

l. This is the proportion of the user groups who have marked that they have seen the *Cloud Atlas* movie

m. These are films and TV shows with the Britain/England (英国) tag.

n. These are albums with the Britain/England 英国tag.

*** denotes significant at 0.01 per cent; ** denotes significant at 0.05 per cent; * denotes significant at 0.1 per cent; + denotes significant at 0.15 per cent (all two-sided). t-test p-values are based on the two-sample t-test with Welch’s approximation and bootstrapped test of equality of means (algorithm 16.2 in Efron and Tibshirani (1994) ‘An Introduction to the Bootstrap.’ CRC Press). In all cases differences in mean were compared against the random. anglo as our baseline group.

It also turns out that only nine translators who participated in the Mitchell contest had also participated in the Coelho contest. Notwithstanding our prior expectation that the two groups would overlap to a greater degree (the Coelho contest involved translation to Chinese from the English language translation of *Manual of the Warrior of Light* from the original Brazilian Portuguese), this indicates perhaps an intrinsic interest in an author – a question we explore further below.

Three additional observations stand out from our findings on engagement from the contest.

First, the addition of David Mitchell book likes for the various groups we analysed picked up most rapidly around key ‘triggers’ associated with the film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*, which was shown in Chinese cinemas in January 2013 (and which had contributed to increasing the awareness of David Mitchell in the eyes of the Chinese public more generally) (Figures 1a and 1b). This is true for not only *Cloud Atlas* but also to some extent for other books in David Mitchell’s back catalogue (Figure 2).

Second, while this acceleration is most evident for the Chinese release of the film, a nontrivial amount of activity coincided with the earlier US release (and therefore access on file sharing networks), raising questions about how and when Chinese consumers access content.

Third, the impact of the *Cloud Atlas* film appears to extend to the release of the six-minute US trailer, though David Mitchell’s visit to China, including his participation at the Shanghai International Literary Festival during the same period, makes disentangling the impact of the two difficult. It is indicative however that when we looked at the ‘likes’ of our groups for novels by the writer Jeanette Winterson, who also visited China in August 2011 as part of a British Council-sponsored visit to Beijing and Shanghai, there was no evidence of a pick up at the time of her visit, suggesting that a link between a physical visit and online presence of a foreign author in China, at least insofar as this is reflected on Douban, is not automatic (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Cumulative David Mitchell books added - *Cloud Atlas* and others - random sample of 1,500 Douban users who had registered a 'like' for *Cloud Atlas* novel before contest

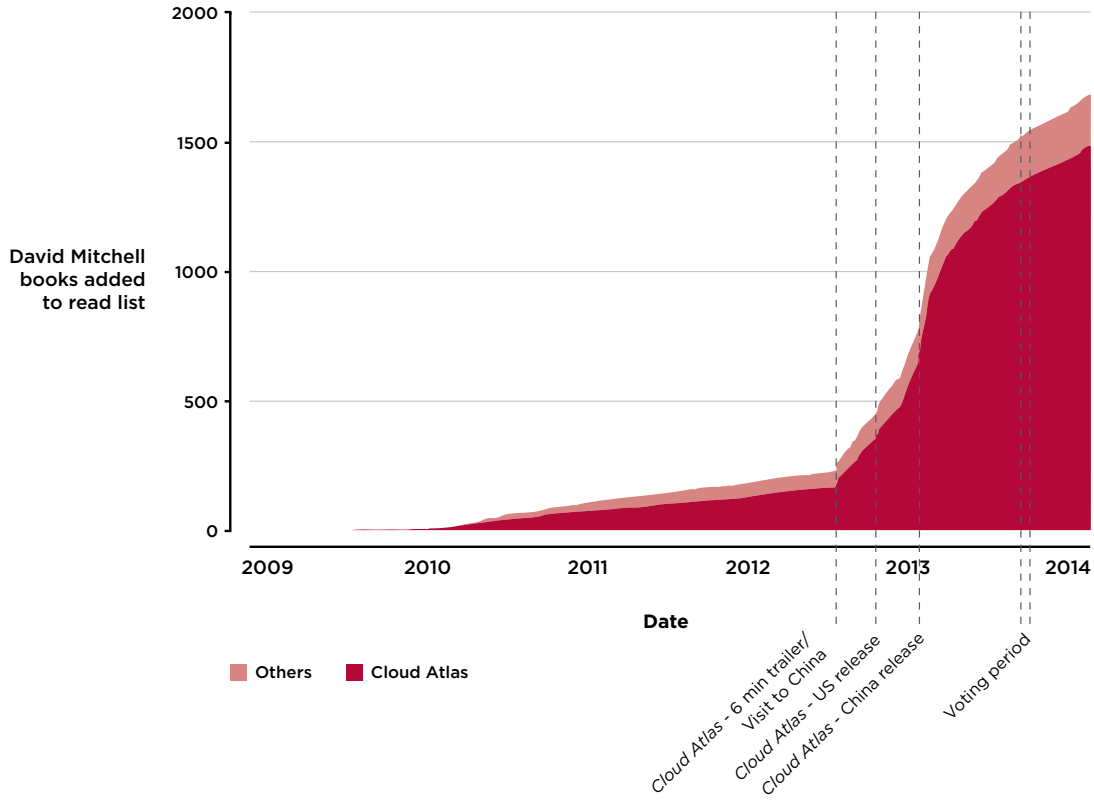
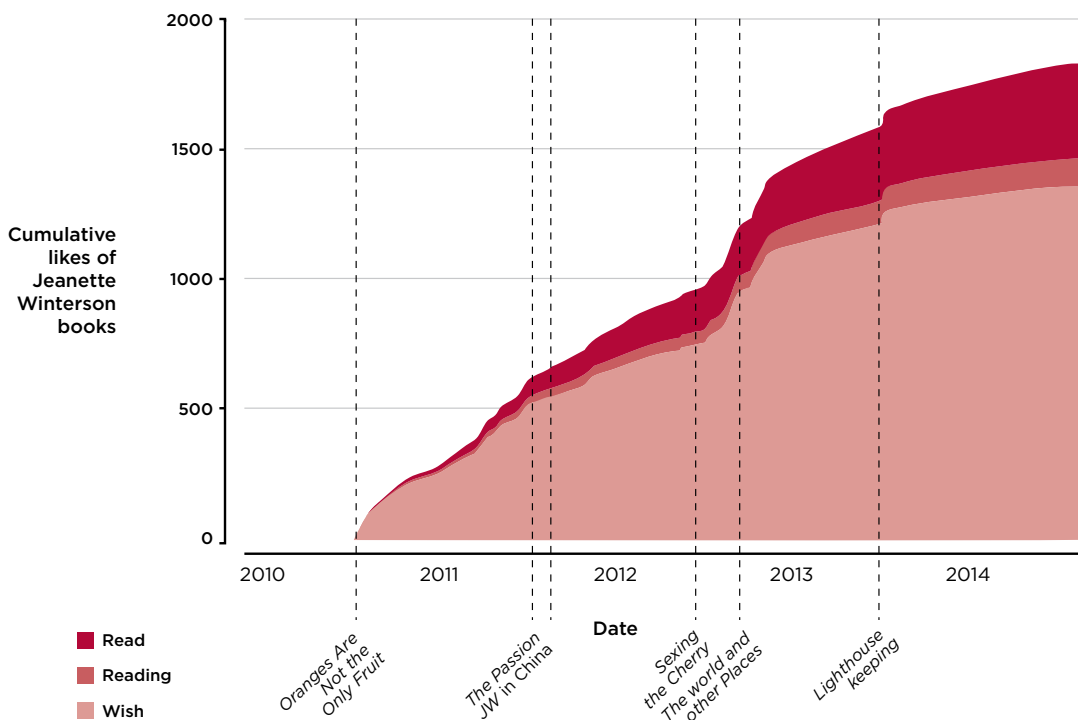


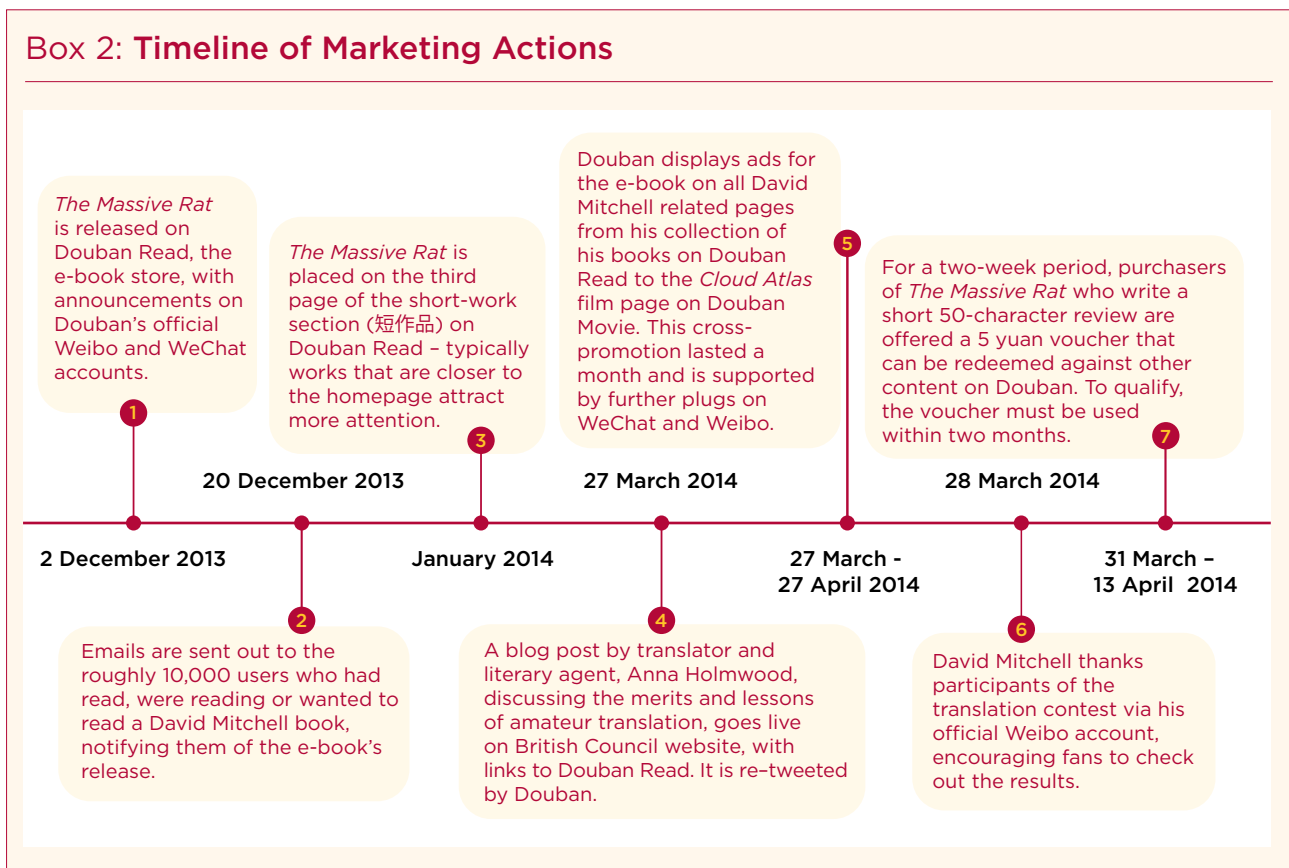
Figure 3: Cumulative Jeanette Winterson books added, random sample of 18,414 'likes'⁹⁴



In the event, the contest resulted in only modest sales of the e-book: 299 units were sold in the period from the time it went on sale to 30 June, the data cut off point for this paper, generating revenues of 600 yuan, approximately £60 – much less than was necessary for Douban Read to break even. Interviews with Douban Read’s editor underlined a number of possible reasons for weak sales, notably the short length of the e-book given a possible tendency among users to conflate volume with value for money (the original English language versions of the short stories were only 666 and 2,792 words long respectively), reinforced by changing consumer perceptions of what price is fair in a digital environment (consistent with the earlier points on anchoring). Reviews of the e-book suggested that some readers had held inaccurate expectations of what they were about to read: they described a sense of anti-climax and disappointment that they had not encountered the same elements of fantasy, science fiction and history that they had found in *Cloud Atlas*; others felt that the stories were sketchy and incomplete, notwithstanding the translator’s postscript.

Efforts were made by Douban Read to promote the e-book on the Douban platform more generally⁹⁵ and other social media – from notifying users who had previously ‘liked’ a David Mitchell book through placing adverts and links on various David Mitchell sites on Douban, including the *Cloud Atlas* film page, to making use of WeChat and the author’s official Weibo account (Box 2). Analytics show that traffic was generated by this internal and external activity, though it is impossible with the data we have to ascertain whether clickthroughs boosted actual sales. In order, the pages for David Mitchell books – his entire back catalogue, not just *Cloud Atlas* – channelled the most users to the e-book site, followed by traffic from the *Cloud Atlas* film page, then WeChat and lastly David Mitchell’s Weibo account.

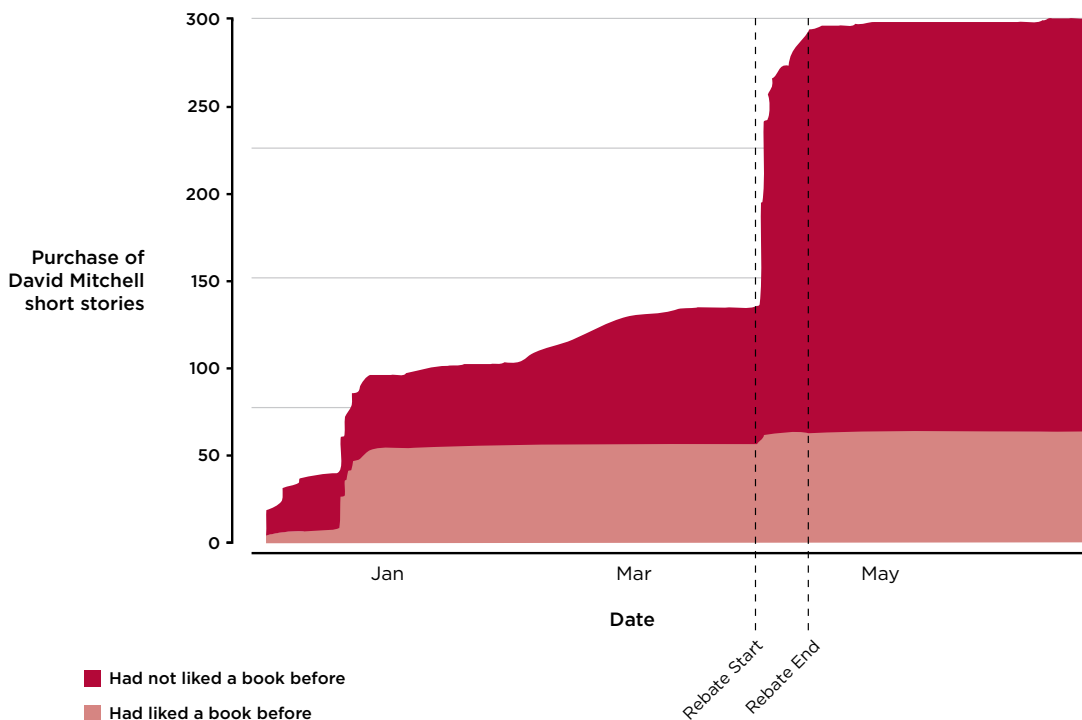
Box 2: Timeline of Marketing Actions



These promotional efforts, however, paled in comparison with Douban's introduction of a voucher scheme over the two-week period (31 March – 13 April 2014). This offered purchasers a five yuan 60-day rebate if they wrote a short review (over 50 characters), that could be used to buy other e-books on the Douban Read platform. Given that Mitchell's e-book cost only 1.99 yuan – in line with Douban Read's general e-book pricing policy for short stories – this represented an aggressive subsidy. Approximately 42 per cent of purchasers who bought the book during the marketing push took advantage of the offer, though this is an underestimate of the scheme's impact, as it excludes those users who may have been motivated by the deal but due to inertia and inactivity failed to go on and submit a review.

This is not the place to assess the sustainability or strategic rationale of particular marketing initiatives, though it is likely that the combination of sales promotion and advertising in this case did bring some new readers of David Mitchell's fiction. Looking only at purchasers who bought the e-book during the marketing phase indeed suggests that they were qualitatively different from other purchasers. Only 7 per cent of this group had previously 'liked' a David Mitchell book, compared with 40 per cent of purchasers who had bought it in the pre-voucher period, though a larger proportion – 37 per cent – had engaged with the *Cloud Atlas* film adaptation, suggesting that the film had acted to create a captive audience for David Mitchell's work that was part exploited when the book was promoted (Figure 4). A small number of users (around 2.5 per cent) added David Mitchell's work to their profile page following it. But in any case the numbers are extremely small.

Figure 4: e-book sales by whether purchaser had previously 'liked' a David Mitchell title



2.2 Social Networks as a Mechanism for Problem-Solving II

Social networking technologies have recast the relationships individuals have with one another and with organisations (think of sites as diverse as Amazon Mechanical Turk and Facebook). Businesses, non-profit organisations and governments frequently incorporate the creative energies of online communities into daily operations and in cases like Wikipedia entire business propositions have been built from them. It is clearly on the radar of the localisation industry such as language translation.⁹⁶ In China, the Yeeyan platform received considerable publicity when it co-operated with Citic Publishing House to crowdsource a translation of Steve Jobs' biography in order to reduce time to market. Real-time interaction between translators eliminated the editing stage found in traditional translation processes, allowing quality adjustments to occur virtually at the same time as the translation.

The Douban contest can be understood through a similar lens, though crowds were more important at some stages of it than others. While entry was genuinely democratic, a team of experts put together by Douban was responsible for shortlisting the translations, and the only crowd input after that point was a simple vote, accompanied by an online forum for users to discuss the various merits of the finalists.

These arrangements bear some resemblance to broadcast-search approaches to crowdsourcing, as operationalised in a scientific setting by platforms like Innocentive, the Boston-based R&D company. The rationale is that the more widely the search process is opened up, the more likely the organisation will find the proverbial needle in the haystack, the one person with the solution to the problem. Radically optimal solutions often come from specialists outside the narrow knowledge domain of the problem. One reason is that R&D laboratories submitting the problems are unable to solve them with tried-and-tested methods, enabling outsiders from relatively more distant fields to see problems with fresh eyes and leverage solutions that may be novel to the laboratory but well-understood by them.⁹⁷

The corollary is that these arrangements may be most appropriate for problems where a 'right' answer exists but is not yet known by the problem solver. This is arguably not true of the translation contest since David Mitchell's work was familiar to a number of participating translators, not least – and perhaps most tellingly – the winner, Tang Jiang (唐江), who was the official translator of two of Mitchell's other novels, *number9dream* and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.⁹⁸ Cost effective as the translation arrangements may have turned out to be for Douban, in that they could theoretically dispense with the need for costly 'professional' translations, it is possible that they were inefficient in a societal sense: totting up the efforts of all the translators, many hours of effort and expertise were arguably wasted that could have been put to other uses, notwithstanding the possible indirect or delayed beneficial spillovers to the entrants from the contest activity. This is an argument, perhaps, for public bodies like the British Council to use such contests to produce translations for less familiar authors whose works are currently unavailable on the local market (as in such cases the optimal translation 'solution' is unlikely to be known in advance).

Where the contest departed from standard broadcast-search models was in permitting the public – as opposed to the 'broadcaster' (David Mitchell in this case) – to vote for the best translation, though, in practice, the shortlisting process had in practice greatly limited possible outcomes by the time users exercised their voice. This highlights the extent to which

crowdsourcing walks a delicate tightrope in efforts to balance the advantages of top-down, traditional decision-making and the benefits of bottom-up, participatory engagement. Vesting control too much on the side of the organisation can disempower the community, leading to distrust and withdrawal of effort (conceivably this may have contributed to the relatively low number of votes, which at 184 was significantly lower than the number of submitted translations). The opposite danger is that the strategic goals of the organisation become marginal to the community's own work when it has substantial autonomy. Likewise, while socially embedded relationships can help underwrite sophisticated forms of collaboration, this richer interaction can also encourage collusive behaviour while leading to subtle pressures to conform, especially where they come from individuals with formal roles or frequent posters.⁹⁹

The difficulty of this balancing act was underscored by the contest's voting procedures. Douban Read's reluctance to moderate online discussions meant that some users sought to dominate threads. Notably, the eventual winner was highly critical in their reviews of other shortlisted translations – in the end, gaining 99 votes, compared to 51 votes for the runner-up. This behaviour was significant in that the winner had been trailing the runner-up by a margin of 25–18 votes prior to these interventions, ones that contravened Douban Read's rule that users post no more than one review insofar as reviews counted towards voting. This was subsequently relaxed on the understanding that the translator could continue to post comments but that they would be excluded as reviews for the purposes of the final vote count, signalling Douban's ambivalence about the locus and limits of control.

Terms such as contest 'gaming' must, however, be used with care in this context – that is to say, private gain and collective welfare are not mutually exclusive. The posts in question were robust, but not rude and were largely relevant to the subject matter in hand. Douban Read's own assessment was that all community content had merit in terms of enhancing translation skills – a nod, perhaps, to the Millian principle that even disagreeable viewpoints should be prized as latent truths. However interpreted, such behaviour takes researchers away from the somewhat rarefied visions of rational debate envisioned by some accounts of online deliberative democracy.

Still, the recognition of due process in crowdsourcing does not settle the issue of quality.¹⁰⁰ Discourse about crowdsourcing, even when it commends its ability to 'democratise' the process of idea generation, often highlights the role of the amateur. Ominous predictions are not difficult to find in which the survival of the professional is at stake, as amateurs bid down market prices without being able to guarantee sufficient quality. These concerns are heightened for translators who, historically, have not enjoyed the same monopoly on expertise as other professions such as law or medicine (though it is being increasingly formalised).¹⁰¹

Evidence from the contest, however, suggested that crowds are to some extent self-selected professionals and experts who opt-in to crowdsourcing arrangements. The contest attracted 466 expressions and 219 final submissions. Those who submitted translations were asked about their translation experience, yielding a decent response rate of 53 per cent (n = 115). In all, 22 per cent of these had previously professionally translated works of fiction and non-fiction. The largest group – 47 per cent – had previous experience of translating magazine articles and web content or had worked in jobs that had a significant element of translation work – often with a technical or scientific orientation. Finally, 31 per cent reported having studied English at university, with some working towards translation qualifications or used translation as a secondary part of their work. A small number also belonged to fansubbing communities, translating film and television programmes.

To understand further the issue of quality, as part of our research 30 randomly selected translations (in addition to the three shortlisted entries) were assessed by a professional literary translator for their accuracy, style, diction and originality.¹⁰² Many fell short of being publishable, though this owed as much to the complexity of the original texts in English – whether it was the choppy, poetic intensity of *The Gardener*, the very opposite of mainstream contemporary Chinese fiction or the irony and dysfunction of *The Massive Rat* pieced together from mundane, easy-to-miss details – not to mention the inherent difficulties in translating between Chinese and English that demand creativity and discretion, not just technical precision, to reimagine a style in such a radically different linguistic setting.

Interestingly, mistakes were fairly uniform, indicating that most translators were confused by a relatively small set of phrases and sentences. Consider a few examples: from *The Gardener*, ‘tart’ as prostitute or strumpet was frequently translated as some form of fruit-filled pastry, overlooking the subtle sexualised imagery in several parts of the text. In another passage, the narrator refers to his wife who is browsing a glossy country living magazine as ‘dreaming of houses uncluttered by reality, by half a lifetime of memories’. Nearly all translations had trouble with the word ‘uncluttered’ that was taken to mean ‘tidied up by’ as in ‘clean houses’, despite the story’s larger motifs of mortality, rootedness and yearning. *The Massive Rat* contained more action and dialogue that proved easier to translate; however, many struggled to pick up on the darker undertones of the piece, such as the hopelessness of the narrator’s marriage, a reference to political problems in Northern Ireland and the contemplation of suicide.

In places, mistakes may have been due to the overdependence on online translation tools or widely available dictionaries being of poor quality, though these kinds of mistranslations were lower than expected, and all translations in the sample demonstrated evidence of individual judgment. In others, translators were keen to add a considerable amount of supporting explanation – less a sign of misinterpretation than the fact that translators did not feel sufficiently confident to leave ambiguities in their submissions – usually a hallmark of high-quality translation. In the effort to make translations more comprehensible on their own terms, aspects of the original writing style were flattened, a common temptation of amateur translation work.

Despite this, all translations were found to exhibit care and consideration and attempted to produce literary texts of style, not just faithful renderings of the content of the stories. In sum, the professional translator concluded that around seven of the 33 translations reviewed – namely the random sample and the three finalists – were of a quality that they could have been made publishable with some minor editing that, extrapolating to the complete 219 sample suggests a number as high as 50, one that is broadly similar to the percentage of those who claimed that they had professional translation experience (though we cannot rule out self-selection bias in those who chose to provide Douban with this information).

The contest did not explore directly the motivations of translators and voters, though it is worth noting that the winning translator shared in revenues on the same terms as if the work had been privately commissioned. At the same time, the likely slender chances of winning the contest, combined with the absence of outsized rewards, suggest that barring significant overconfidence, the extrinsic opportunity to make money was not the only motivator. Sharpening translation skills, pushing oneself to solve a difficult problem and constructing a portfolio of work for future employment also arguably mattered.

In this regard it is worth reflecting further on why voting turned out to be lower than the number of submitted translations, given the relative costs of engaging in the two activities. The puzzle unravels, however, when one considers the limited extent to which voting tapped into these extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. More might have been done, for instance, to make voters feel that peers, such as translators, consumed and valued their contributions, an important source of motivation identified in literature.¹⁰³ As structured, the contest limited possibilities for this interaction: once the winner was chosen, the process of translation was closed to community involvement and further commentary, reinforcing the likely perception – discussed earlier – that the contest was a narrowly ‘technical’ exercise.

2.3 Social Networks as a Source of Market Intelligence III (Big Data)

Aside from their value as ‘lab’ environments for testing out reader engagement strategies and as crowdsourcing facilities, social media platforms provide publishers with an unprecedented wealth of data on the market for authors’ works. Many social media platforms publish their own Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) – open architectures which enable content and data to be shared between communities and applications – and Douban is no exception in this regard. In addition, web scraping techniques can be used to transform unstructured data on social media sites into structured data that can be collated in a database, and then analysed and visualised.

This way, publishers and writers can use a platform like Douban to reveal hidden patterns about the demand for their work, understand the character and nature of their fan communities, and generate wider insights that can be used to inform publication and marketing strategies.

We learn, for example, that those users on Douban that have read, are reading or wish to read David Mitchell’s novel, *Cloud Atlas* have global tastes with a particular interest in Japanese fiction. The mystery writer, Keigo Higashino is a clear favourite – and features more frequently than Haruki Murakami who is cited as a critical influence on Mitchell. It is also noteworthy that the main Chinese representation is science-fiction, Liu Cixin’s *Three Body trilogy* (三体). Musical tastes show a marked affinity for post-2000s Anglo-American pop, reflecting perhaps the demographic profile of this group of users, the infancy of the liberalisation process and high depreciation rates for music.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the oldest popular work for this group – whether domestic or foreign – is Nirvana’s grunge classic, *Nevermind*.¹⁰⁵

The heatmap in Figure 5 shows the correlative patterns between the top 20 most ‘liked’ books (in black), films (in red) and albums (in green) for a random sample of 1,500 Douban users who liked (500 who had read, 500 who were reading and 500 who wished to read) *Cloud Atlas*.¹⁰⁶ Foreign book titles are given in bold and the British titles are coloured blue.

It is striking how there are only two British titles in the books list: the novel *Cloud Atlas* itself and W Somerset Maugham’s novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*, revealing that readers of *Cloud Atlas* on Douban do not count British literature more generally as amongst their main literary tastes.¹⁰⁷ It is equally striking that the *Cloud Atlas* novel clusters more strongly with films than it does with other books.

Figure 5: Heatmap for top 20 most popular books, films and albums for Douban users who 'like' David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

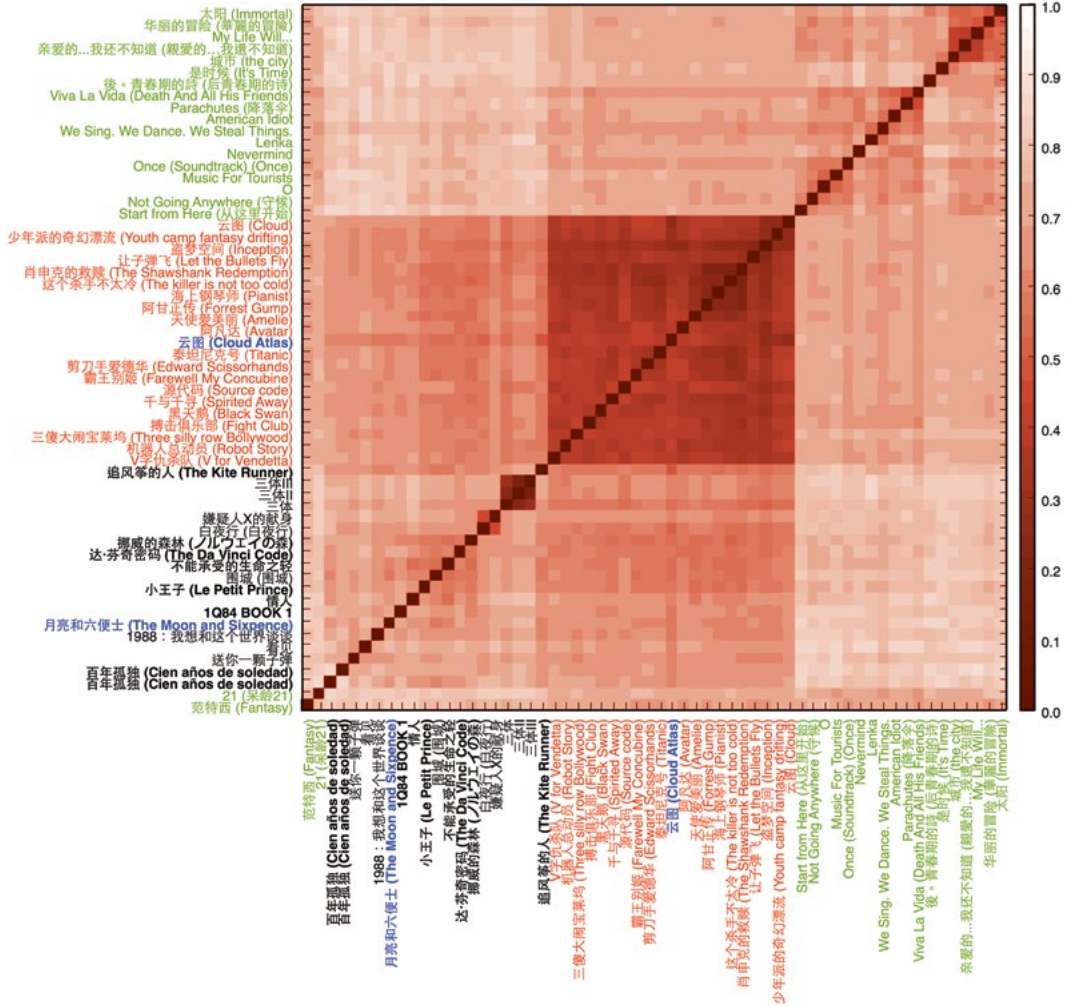


Table 2 shows that those who 'like' *Cloud Atlas* tend also to be more avid readers than other users, and more committed consumers of British culture on Douban more generally. They also have larger numbers of follower and following relationships – though fewer than voters and purchasers in the translation contest, Table 1 – consistent with them having more influence on the social network.

Table 2: Cultural preferences of users that 'like' David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* compared with other Douban users?

	Random. anglo ^a	Random. bc ^b	<i>Cloud Atlas</i> read ^c	<i>Cloud Atlas</i> reading ^d	<i>Cloud Atlas</i> wish ^e
Number ^f	500	500	495	494	487
Timespan, days ^g	689	795**	1226***	1024***	1222***
No. of followers, mean	33	98***	295**	102***	164***
No. of following, mean	35	73***	72***	64***	107***
No. of titles read, mean	51	56	196***	107***	140***
O/w Foreign Lit (外国文学), mean ^h	11	11	47***	20***	26***
O/w Britain/England (英国), mean ⁱ	4	4	16***	6***	8***
No. of David Mitchell titles read, mean ^j	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0
Proportion who had seen <i>Cloud Atlas</i> movie ^k	0.1	0.1+	0.6***	0.5***	0.5***
No. of Britain/England (英国) movies and TV shows seen, mean ^l	13	25***	56***	36***	44***
No. of Britain/England (英国) albums heard, mean ^m	7	13+	19***	12	18**

a. This is a random sample of 500 Douban users who have marked that they have Read, are Reading or Wish to Read at least one book from the list of 200 books that have most frequently tagged 英国 (Britain/England) by Douban users. This list includes non-fiction as well as fiction writers, like Alain de Botton, Jeanette Winterson, Agatha Christie, George Orwell, Douglas Adams, Charles Dickens, Somerset Maugham, Ian McEwan and JK Rowling.

b. This is a random sample of 500 Douban users who follow the British Council site on Douban: <http://site.douban.com/britishcouncil/followers/>

c. This is a random sample of Douban users who say they have read *Cloud Atlas*.

d. This is a random sample of Douban users who say they are reading *Cloud Atlas*.

e. This is a random sample of Douban users who say they wish to read *Cloud Atlas*.

f. These groups do not always contain exactly 500 users as originally sampled. As the data collection was lengthy and involved both API access and web scraping, there was some attrition for a range of factors, including: (1) some user IDs were found to be or became invalid (this may include cases where users closed accounts during the collection – all social networks suffer from some user 'churn'); (2) some users had very complex profiles (with, for example, a very large number of likes) which caused API calls to fail. The numbers

are generally quite small and we do not believe this would have had a material effect on results (in the latter case, these users are displaying quite atypical behaviour that seems unrepresentative of users in general).

g. 'Timespan' refers to the number of days that had elapsed between the user first and last updating something on their Douban account, as of the time the data set was constructed.

h. These are titles with the foreign literature (外国文学) tag.

i. These are titles with the Britain/England (英国) tag.

j. This refers to distinct titles (that is, a user who says they have read two editions of the same title are treated as having read one title).

k. This is the proportion of user groups who have marked that they have seen the *Cloud Atlas* movie.

l. These are films and TV shows with the Britain/England (英国) tag.

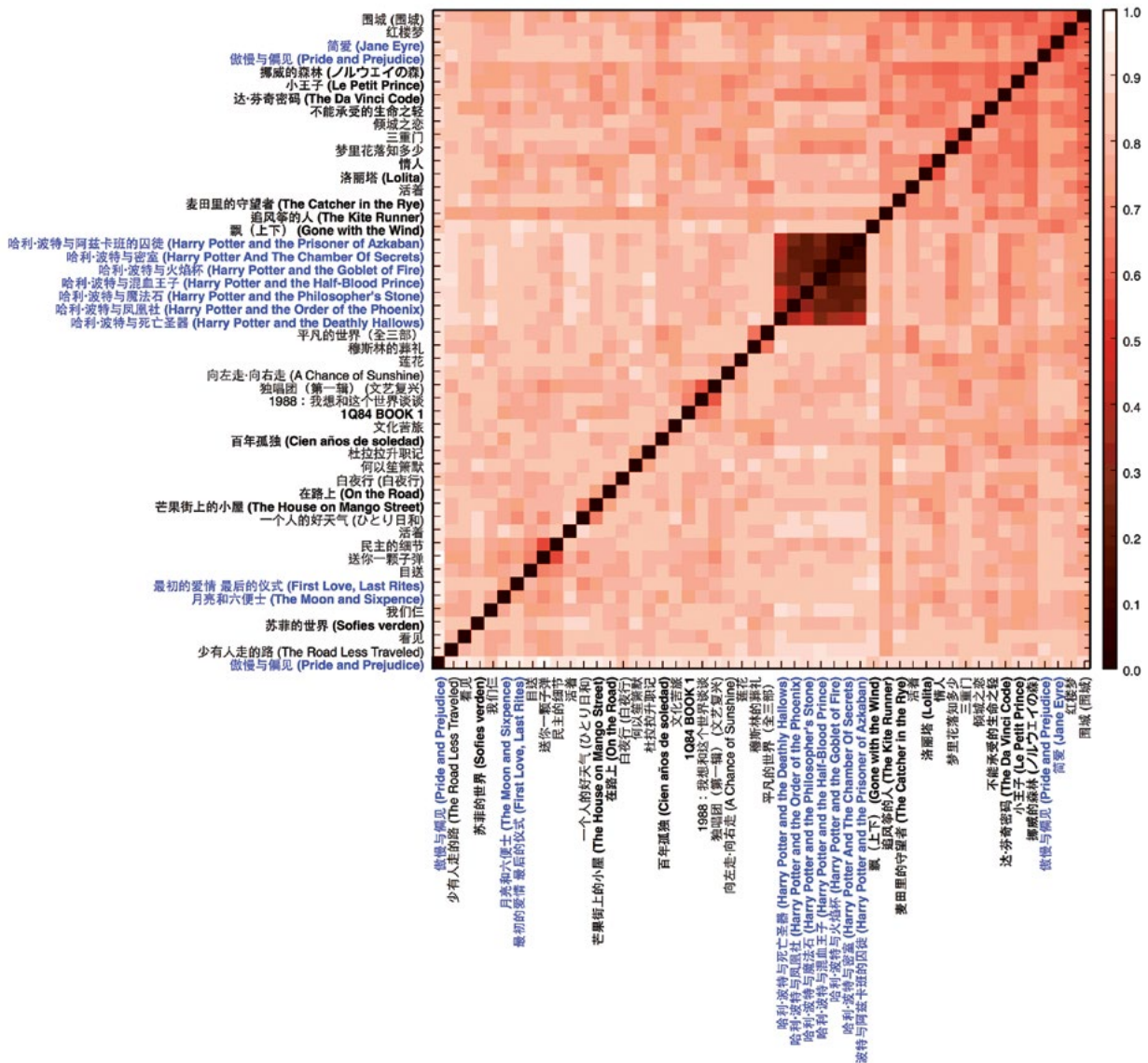
m. These are albums with the Britain/England 英国 tag.

*** denotes significant at 0.01 per cent; ** denotes significant at 0.05 per cent; * denotes significant at 0.1 per cent; + denotes significant at 0.15 per cent (all two-sided). t-test p-values are based on the two-sample t-test with Welch's approximation and bootstrapped test of equality of means. In all cases differences in mean are compared against the random. anglo as our baseline group

Interestingly, calculating the ratio of book titles – in general, and for British books separately – that are on users' wish lists to those that they have read reveals that those wishing to read *Cloud Atlas* have the highest ratio of all the groups considered in Tables 1 and 2 (not shown in the tables). This indicates perhaps that this group is the most aspirational of readers. The equivalent ratios for film suggest that this is also the case for film going too (though not for listening to music). Likewise, the number of foreign and British books that are read as a proportion of total books is fairly stable across all groups, a relationship that holds when we consider other groups (not presented in Table 2).

Probing more deeply the preferences of the Random.anglo and Random.bc groups of users gives us insights into those who engage more broadly with British culture on Douban. The heatmap in Figure 6 shows the correlations between the top 50 books most liked by these two groups combined (that is, 1,000 Douban users made up of the 500 randomly drawn users with at least one British book in their collection and 500 randomly drawn followers of the British Council’s site on Douban).

Figure 6: Heatmap for top 50 most popular books for Douban users who are engaged with British books



The immediate result that stands out is the very strong clustering of preferences for JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Jane Austen exhibits a similar pattern, though unlike JK Rowling clusters more with Chinese fiction, specifically classics such as *Dream of Red Mansions* (红楼梦) and *Fortress Besieged* (围城). While JK Rowling has benefited from a number of tailwinds, including a global commercial franchise, the popularity of Jane Austen, a more literary figure, is less clear: one explanation is that the author's work was able to ride the initial wave of liberalisation in the early 1980s by steering a course between romanticism and realism, appealing to the mainstream while retaining enough credibility to stay on the safe side of the ideological lines. Institutional factors may have also played a role, especially the rapid growth of faculty staff, especially females in the English departments of Chinese universities who sought the inclusion of Austen's works on curricula.¹⁰⁸

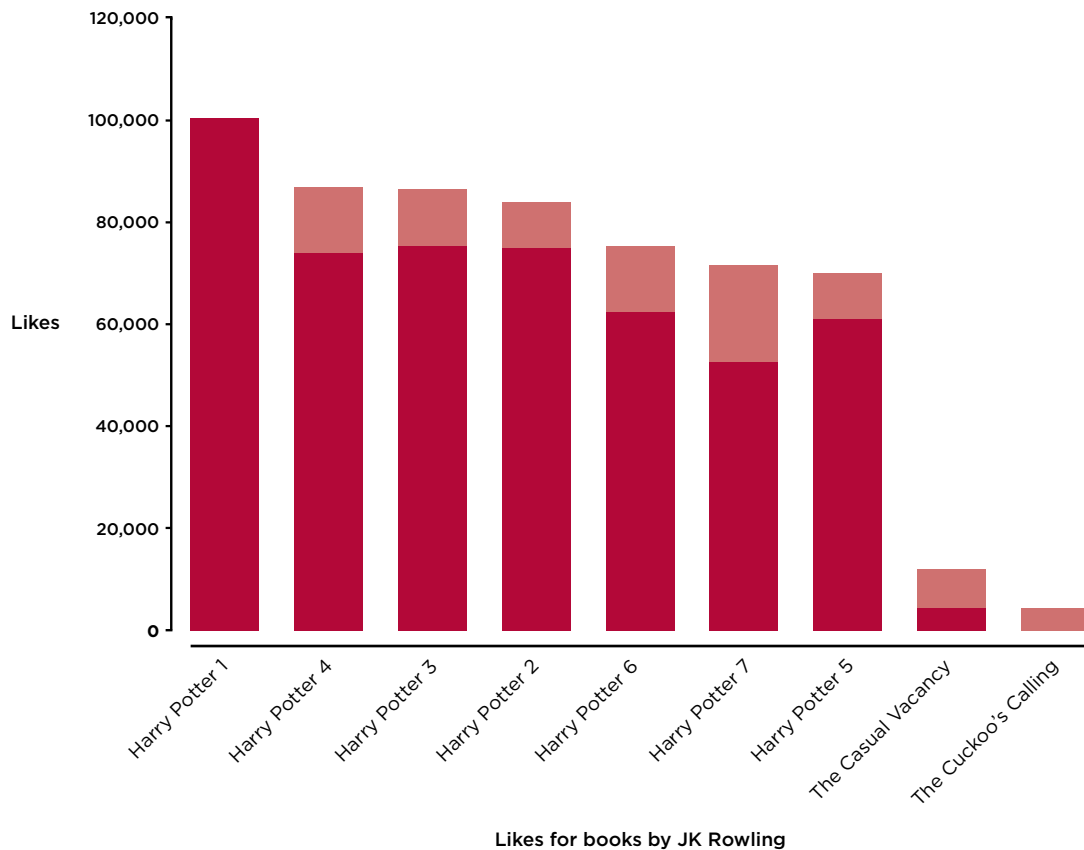
Other noteworthy features include the relative paucity of British books: those that feature divide squarely between current blockbusters and classics. It appears that this missing middle is not a new phenomenon: Jane Austen, her legacy not yet crystallised, suffered from its effects nearly a century ago, her work almost entirely overlooked by the first major Chinese surveys of foreign literature, including Wang Jing's *A History of English Literature* (1920) and Zeng Dubai's *English Literature* (1928).¹⁰⁹

One outlier is Ian McEwan's *First Love, Last Rites*. The main theme of the book, in its own description, is the "blurry and perilous divide between childhood and adulthood", a coming-of-age motif that connects other popular works – from *The House on Mango Street* through *Lolita* to *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is worth noting that the book was adapted as a film in 1998, an effect that may also explain the presence of some Chinese titles – for instance, *Go La La Go* (杜拉拉升职记) and *Turn Left, Turn Right* (向左走 向右走).¹¹⁰ Finally attention should be drawn to a number of titles – *The Kite Runner* and *Norwegian Wood* – that cut across local and foreign literature that otherwise exhibit some, if admittedly weak clustering.

Such patterns raise the question of whether publishers can identify groups of more committed fans for an author's work amongst Douban's community – users who 'like' multiple titles by the same author.

Simply counting the number of likes on a title-by-title basis gives a direct measure of the popularity of an author's different works on the platform. Figure 7 plots these numbers in the tall columns for JK Rowling. It shows that there are around 100,000 likes on Douban for the first *Harry Potter* novel. The successively shorter red columns depict how many of these 100,000 readers like JK Rowling's other novels too. The chart reveals a large and apparently committed fan base for JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels on Douban, though it should be emphasised that this has overwhelmingly benefited demand for translations rather than the original texts in English.¹¹¹

Figure 7: Likes for books by JK Rowling



It turns out that this pattern, apart from the clear dominance of translations, is very much the exception to the rule – namely, that even if British authors have several popular individual titles on Douban, it is very rare to find users who have read multiple works. Figure 8 plots the ‘decay’ rates – constructed by conditioning on an author’s most popular title on Douban – for 13 British authors, along with those for 12 Chinese and ten Japanese authors for comparison. All 35 authors have at least three titles with a presence on Douban.

With one clear exception – Rowling, who has the lowest decay rate of all authors considered¹¹² – the British authors exhibit a pattern of sharp decay. This is in marked contrast with the Chinese writers whose user likes have a less pronounced tendency to decay, and the Japanese writers who, in contrast, appear to be somewhere in between – an intriguing result that deserves further investigation.

Figure 9 shows that *Cloud Atlas* is easily David Mitchell’s most popular novel, with around 16,000 users saying they have either read, are reading or wish to read it, followed by just under 3,000 for *Ghostwritten*. Even this low second number over-estimates the extent to which a mature fan base for Mitchell’s work exists on Douban, however, as the number of readers who like *Cloud Atlas* and have also read *Ghostwritten* is in fact almost half of this, as the red bar indicates. Only 1,519 Douban users have read both *Cloud Atlas* and *number9dream* (and the number that have read *Cloud Atlas*, *number9dream* and another Mitchell title is even smaller than this). We get similar results if we construct these ‘decay’ charts by conditioning

first on the readership of Mitchell’s other novels.¹¹³ That is, there are relatively few individuals who have read more than any one of David Mitchell’s novels, and that number quickly gets even smaller when we consider how many have read more than two. This lack of a mature Mitchell fan base on Douban may cast further light on why relatively low numbers of users engaged with the translation contest.

Taken together, these results suggest that – JK Rowling aside – there is little evidence that British writers have readymade fan communities that they can rely on to engage with new works. Publishers therefore need to consider alternative strategies for identifying potential readers, even in cases where the raw likes data suggest that they have multiple popular works. The further illustrative examples in Figure 9 emphasise this point; even a strong, readily identifiable genre author like science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke lacks an invested fan base on Douban beyond the *Odyssey* series, as indicated by the number of users who like more than one title.

Figure 8: ‘Like’ decay rates of Douban users who ‘like’ an author’s most popular book – British, Chinese and Japanese authors

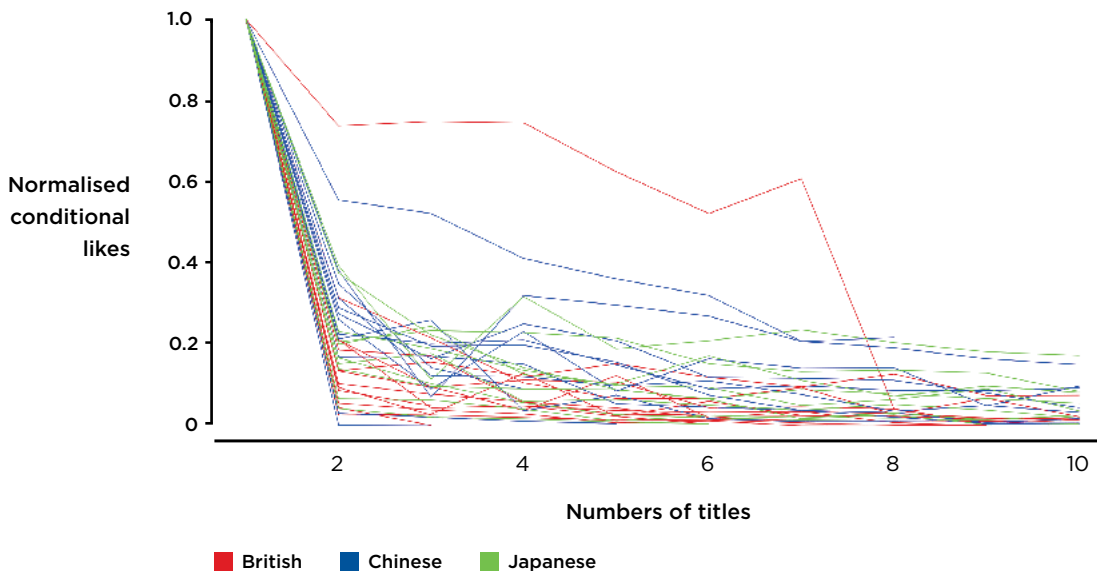
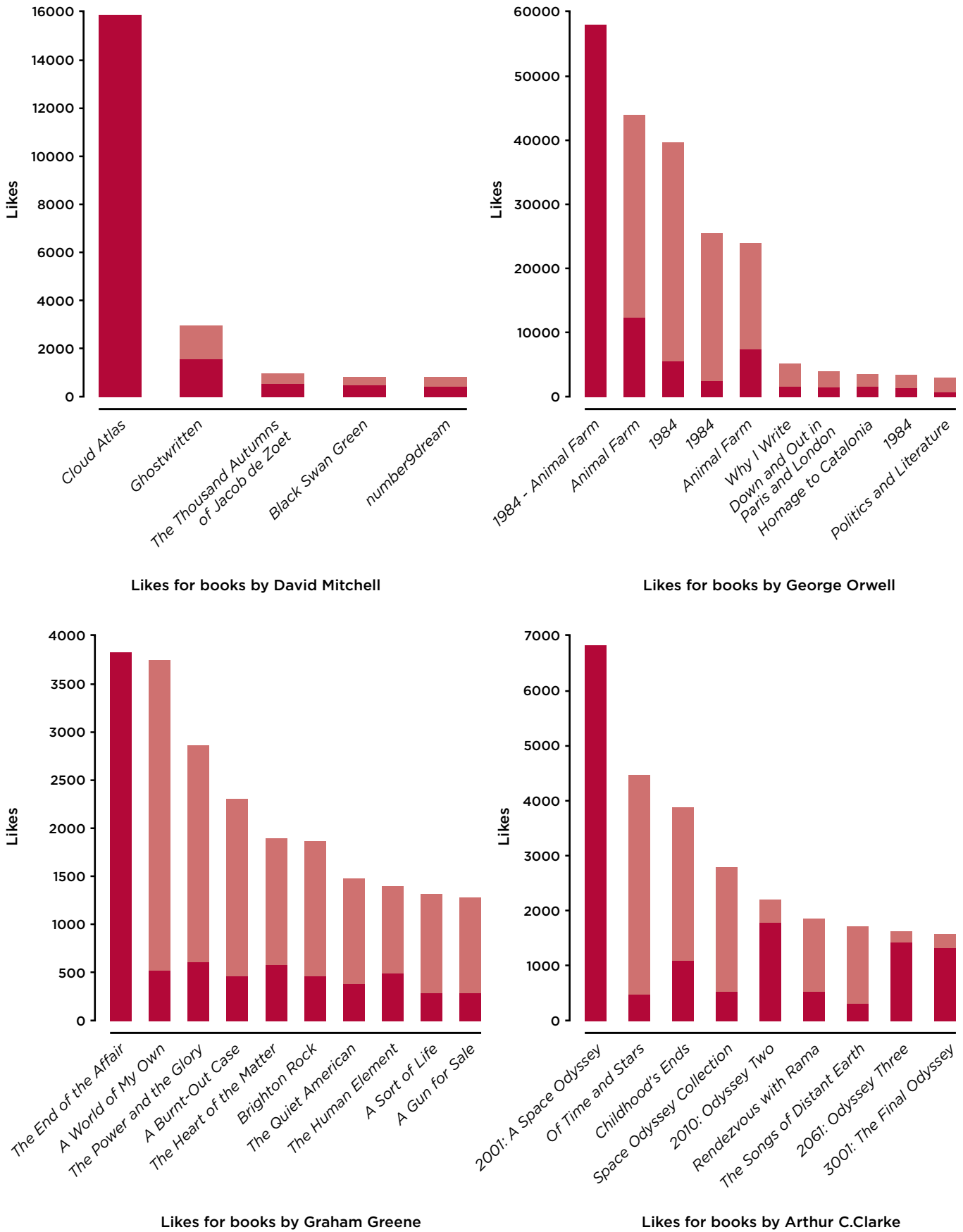


Figure 9: 'Like' decay rates of Douban users for a selection of British authors



Notwithstanding this important conclusion, our analysis does not capture the full picture. To fill in the rest, it would be useful to investigate the role, if any, of threshold effects – whether users’ propensity to read an author’s back catalogue increases disproportionately after a certain number of books, a possibility that might entail consequences for how content is sold, for instance, bundling via anthologies. Aggregate indicators like these also risk understating the importance of the most committed fans in the market for an author’s work. While they may not be large in number, we noted in the context of variable pricing that they may nonetheless constitute a valuable segment of the market.

Table 3 considers the works of seven of the 13 British authors in Figure 8 that have at least four books on Douban: Ian McEwan, Jeanette Winterson, Somerset Maugham, James Herriot, Angela Carter, JK Rowling and Oscar Wilde. For each of these authors we identify those Douban users that like all four of their most popular books – we call these ‘superfans’ – and randomly sample 100 of these (the exception is Oscar Wilde who has only 17 superfans on Douban based on this definition). The table compares the characteristics of these fans with those of what we call ‘normal’ fans – a random sample of 500 Douban users for each author who like just one of their top four most popular books. It confirms that the superfans are substantively more engaged with culture than the other fans, and also have more developed social networks. This is true not only in the sense that superfans’ communities are larger but also that their follower–following ratio is approximately 70 per cent higher than that for normal fans – possible evidence that superfans are influencers and even gatekeepers.¹¹⁴ This potentially opens up a number of commercial avenues – not only quantitatively in terms of increasing the diffusion of content but also qualitatively in terms of influencing the willingness of fellow fans to pay for premium content.^{115, 116}

Table 3: Superfans and normal fans

	N	Mean no. following	Mean no. of followers	Mean no. books read	Mean no. books reading	Mean no. books wishes	Mean no. film wishes	Mean no. music wishes
Superfans	608 ^a	143	412	333	29	127	391	96
‘Normal’ fans	3490	65	113	107	10	28	122	23

a. This does not equal 700 (100 randomly sampled superfans for all seven authors who have at least four books on Douban) because one author, Oscar Wilde, had significantly less than 100 superfans and some users are superfans of more than one author in this group.

3. CONCLUSION

The opening up and continued fast growth of China's economy represents a potentially great market opportunity for British and other foreign producers of cultural content. As is the case with film studios, music labels and rights holders more generally, book publishers worldwide have their eyes on the Chinese market. There is a tendency to observe these opportunities with indiscriminating optimism, however, a line of thinking that can be traced back to the old industrialists' dream that if one Chinaman wanted to lengthen his jacket by only an inch, it would increase the output of cotton from their mills by millions.

In fact, there are stark differences between Chinese and Western book consumption habits which present considerable hurdles for UK publishers – the undeveloped nature of the e-book market, the popularity of online fiction (dominated by local talent), a seemingly low willingness to pay, attitudes to piracy and last, but not least, an immature understanding of Chinese readers' preferences. As a consequence of all these factors the market uncertainties are great.

Where should UK publishers and writers be focusing their efforts?

In this paper, we explore how they can negotiate such uncertainties by using data from online social networks which the Chinese public has been particularly enthusiastic to embrace. Douban presents a unique opportunity in this regard. Being at the same time a social media platform, a publisher and a retailer, the platform permits rights holders to take a data-driven approach to engaging with readers, understand their wider cultural preferences and behaviours, and identify – and exploit – their influence in social networks. We examine these opportunities through the lens of an experiment with the novelist, David Mitchell that took the form of an online translation contest held in September 2013 and that we designed for the purposes of this study.

What did we learn?

First, that the online translation contest attracted over 200 entrants, of the same order of magnitude as previous Douban translation contests. Analysis of these entrants' wider cultural preferences – as captured by their likes on Douban – suggests that their motivations lay in language and translation, rather than in their loyalties to David Mitchell. So, although translators were more likely to have engaged with his work than Douban users with a general interest in British literature, the difference turns out to be slight. While there was clearer evidence that those who voted in the contest and those who purchased the winning translations were more familiar with Mitchell's writing, by no stretch of the imagination could these groups be characterised as fans (though the presence of some fans amongst the purchaser group will have been obscured by the relatively large number who responded to Douban's aggressive price discounting strategy). Moreover, there was little evidence that those who did engage with the contest – be it through submitting entries, voting or buying the winning translations – went on to engage more extensively with Mitchell's work as a result. Far more important in sparking interest in David Mitchell, it appears, was the Hollywood

adaption of *Cloud Atlas*, including the English language six minute trailer. More work is required to understand such cross-media effects; but insofar as most writers will not enjoy such a boon, it is food for thought for those weighing up how much effort to invest in reader engagement.

Second, we learned that online translation contests can be effective and timely mechanisms for delivering high-quality Chinese translations of English fiction. An independent analysis of the entries suggested that as many as one in five of those submitted could, with relatively light editing and revision, have been made ready for publication. There is an open question as to how publishers can in these situations engage with those who produce high-quality translations but who did not win, to make sure their efforts are not wholly in vain.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we confirmed that social networks contain valuable insights into fan preferences and traits that publishers and writers can tap to better understand the Chinese market. In particular, while we found a number of British writers who had several popular works on Douban (David Mitchell included), it turns out that none – JK Rowling aside – had large numbers of the same fans liking their different titles (a very different situation from Chinese writers). Our analysis uncovered a smaller number of ‘hard core’ fans for these authors, however, which may point to the need for different engagement (and possibly commercial) strategies from publishers – ones where they deepen (and monetise) their relationship with these superfans. These fans, our analysis revealed, are far more engaged with British culture (books, films and music) than other Douban users and occupy more prominent positions in their social networks as measured by their number of followers. The experience of other cultural industries like video games suggests it is not inconceivable that even low numbers of such committed fans – if they can be identified – may be sufficient to allow publishers to be commercially successful, questions that merit further research.

Our findings hint at ways in which tastes for specific authors and their works may cluster, illustrating how analysis of social data can generate actionable insights that elude more top-down analysis. Yet they also underscore the extent to which interest in British authors as a whole – at least on Douban – seems highly contingent. Interest rarely extends beyond top titles, though effects appear to be less stark for works such as sequels and adaptations whose discoverability and quality are *ex ante* less uncertain, building on accumulated consumption skills.

As a case study built around one experiment, involving David Mitchell and Douban, we are still scratching the surface of what UK publishers can learn from China’s social networks. As the stakes of making calls about where and how much UK publishers should invest become ever higher, so leaning on data to minimise guesswork grows ever more attractive – and with it the promise of a more rigorous and realistic view of China’s opportunities and challenges.

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105. One possibility is that this represents the 2011 reissue that marked the 20th anniversary of the original.
106. Technically, the heatmaps reflect 'cosine similarity' between the likes of the 1,500 users – that is, 0 denotes similarity (darker) and 1 denotes non-similarity (lighter) – rather than statistical correlation.
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112. The Chinese writer with the lowest decay rate is Jin Yong (金庸).
113. These results are available on request from the authors.
114. The follower-following ratio is defined as the number of followers that a user has relative to the number of users that he or she is following.
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116. The task of uncovering other influential users is a work in progress. Recalling Tables 1 and 2, findings are more informative about the means than about other features of the distribution, notably its skewness. Across all variables and within all groups, a few, though not necessarily the same users appear to have particularly high values: for instance, we identify users with follower counts that exceed ten standard deviations, an outcome that should not occur with any distribution that is remotely 'normal' (variables such as the number of UK albums heard also exhibit extreme skew).

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